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Aphrodite's Hat

Written by Salley Vickers

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SALLEY VICKERS

Aphrodite's Hat

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MRS RADINSKY



 ‘And what,’ asked Mr Pullen, nervously shuffling his papers together on his knees, ‘is to be done about Mrs Radinsky?’

It was the end-of-year meeting of Chesterton Court’s Residents’ Association and thanks to Mr Pullen’s patient steering they had arrived finally – and thankfully, thought Clare Trevellyan – at ‘Any Other Business’.

The atmosphere in Mr Pullen’s cramped flat – where in deference to his role as chair the residents’ meetings were always held – became uneasy. Mr and Mrs Hampshire, who, by virtue of their owning two of the penthouse flats, were accorded double voting powers, started forward on the perilously fragile chairs provided by Mr Pullen. Don Parsons, who had been hoping to get away sharpish, glanced

anxiously across at his neighbour Susan Macclesfield and, catching her eye, sighed audibly. Other residents, who had been frankly dragooned into coming, shifted irritably, keen to get back to addressing their late Christmas cards.

Mr Pullen retrieved his glasses from the pocket of his cardigan and studied the past minutes as if refreshing his memory over what had been agreed when the topic of Mrs Radinsky last arose. This was purely a delaying tactic. He recollected all too well. And knew who would be asked to bear the lion's share of responsibility in dealing with her.

Chesterton Court had not always been the salubrious establishment it now was. As with so many formerly rough areas in London, it had 'come up'. The elegant white-stuccoed building, now boasting a live-in caretaker and a well-maintained garden, was once the shabby quarters of a housing association. Every previous occupant had long departed, except Mrs Radinsky.

Mrs Radinsky lived on the top floor, in number thirty-seven, in what was now described as a 'pent-house studio'. Nobody knew the precise age of the occupant, but it was guessed she must be in her seventies. This did not stand in the way of Mrs Radinsky's pursuit of her professional activities. In the past, no one at Chesterton Court had cared, or even noticed, that numbers of gentlemen callers regularly made their way, in those days up several

flights of stone stairs, to Mrs Radinsky's flat, where they stayed, perhaps an hour, before letting themselves discreetly out again.

The procession of callers had not with time abated. If anything, numbers had swelled. Men of all ages, some surprisingly young, made their way, by means of the newly installed lift, to the sixth floor and, after a suitable lapse of time, down again.

Some of these visitors were seen carrying bottles of gin or vodka. This in itself would not perhaps have aroused hostility were it not for the fact that quantities of empty bottles were found, regularly, piled outside the waste area with no effort made to dispose of them in the environmental bins. Mrs Hampshire claimed to have stumbled on one when returning from a performance of *Swan Lake* and had given herself a nasty cut, said to have turned septic. She was now kicking herself that she had allowed the wearing of conspicuous plasters, which had been kept up for several weeks, to lapse that evening, forgetting that the topic of Mrs Radinsky was likely to come up at the residents' meeting.

She made up for this by rubbing her ankle vigorously while at the same time voicing an opinion. 'We must get the council in. She is breaking the law.'

'Technically not,' said Mr Pullen, who had once had some legal training and had paid for it ever since by getting lumbered with this sort of job. 'The

garden area is ours so she is not infringing any actual, er, law.'

'My cleaner says there are rats,' retorted Mrs Hampshire, refusing to be sidetracked by reason.

'Rats?' Clive Butterworth looked alarmed. He was a tall young man, with a tendency to nervous rashes and a pathological horror of rats. So serious was this condition that he had abandoned a first degree in Eng. Lit. for one in Environmental Studies after he was asked to address a seminar on 1984.

'Rats,' repeated Mrs Hampshire with ominous firmness, sensing she had collared an ally.

'Rats are health and safety,' Mr Pullen explained. 'They are not, sadly, illegal.' He smiled at his little attempt at lightening the tone but, getting no response, quickly readjusted his expression to one of grave concern.

'What is it she does, anyway?' asked Clare Trevellyan, who was slim and pretty, with the easy-going kindness of the young, before time has had too much of a go at them. She was not strictly a resident at all but had come along on behalf of her cousin, Hetty, whose flat Clare was using while Hetty, single-handed, was sailing round the world.

An atmosphere, largely emanating from Mrs Hampshire, at once fell upon the room. Really, if this young interloper didn't know . . . !

'But we don't know, do we?' Clare Trevellyan persisted, responding to the unstated reproach. 'I

mean she can't, really, at her age still be on the game.'

Clive Butterworth giggled and Mrs Hampshire shot him a warning look which suggested that she would not tolerate any backsliding.

'Whatever she is up to,' she said, giving the phrase sinister emphasis, 'it is a condition of the lease that the apartments are not used as places of work.'

This was a mistake. Everybody knew that any number of the residents carried out small self-employed businesses and relied on each other for assistance with computer shut-downs, blocked drains, late tax returns and Feng Shui. The mood of the room began to disassociate itself from Mrs Hampshire and sensing this she afforded Clive Butterworth a fickle smile.

But Clive, unwilling to be thought a wimp by Clare Trevellyan, had in the blink of an eye transferred his allegiance. 'In that case, as I understand it, half the building would be asked to leave.'

'In any event,' said Mr Pullen, he hoped placatingly, 'Mrs Radinsky is not a leaseholder. As you know, she is a long-term tenant. It is, I'm afraid, up to us to persuade the council that it is time for her to be re-housed.'

'What do you suppose she does do, though?' Clive asked Clare. As the youngest members of the

meeting, they had elected to take the stairs, leaving the others to pack themselves by turns into the inconveniently small lift. Clive, who was behind Clare, observed her ankles with pleasure as she ran down the steps.

‘Don’t know,’ Clare said over her shoulder. ‘And don’t care. I just didn’t like that dreadful creature getting at the poor old duck.’

‘I don’t know that “duck” describes her,’ said Clive. He was a quiet young man but he noticed things. He had noticed Mrs Radinsky’s callers. It was hard to know what to make of them, but they appeared to be men of the world.

A few days later, he bumped into the object of these calls herself. Mrs Radinsky, carting several bulky bags, was getting into the lift. Clive held the door for her and then, not wanting to seem to avoid her – though for the sake of fitness it was his habit to take the stairs – followed her in.

‘Bless you, dear,’ Mrs Radinsky said.

She was a small woman, with remarkably black hair, well-carmined lips and bright hazel eyes. The eyes put Clive in mind of a bird’s. She smelled of something powdery, which might have been marguerite but was in fact lily-of-the valley and reminded Clive of his grandmother. She was wearing red suede gloves, what appeared to be a man’s tweed coat, cut down, and a fluffy red scarf. Nothing about her, unless you counted the lipstick, looked even faintly racy.

The lift took them to the top floor and again Clive held open the door. 'Thank you, dear,' said Mrs Radinsky. 'Come in and have a glass of something, if you like.'

Clive hesitated. There was the question of the rats. His curiosity was not so strong that it outreached his timidity. But then the thought of telling Clare Trevellyan that he had penetrated number thirty-seven galvanised him.

'OK,' he said. 'Thank you.'

Mrs Radinsky's flat like Mrs Radinsky was small and dark with a preponderance of red. Fringed lampshades glowed hospitably crimson against a deep flock paper of a kind which Clive had only seen previously in the less upmarket type of Indian restaurant. The flock was almost invisible behind a crowd of pictures of a catholic range of subjects: two elephants giving a third a shower, some seductively ill-clad mermaids disporting themselves on rocks, a yoked horse standing patiently beneath a spreading oak, a lady in a pale blue crinoline squinting at a man in a frock coat.

On the crammed sideboard were a couple of ships in bottles. Noticing the direction of her guest's gaze, Mrs Radinsky said, 'My father was a naval man.' She indicated that Clive should sit down on a peach velour sofa, well ballasted with cushions, while she disappeared into the kitchen from where she could be heard whistling while unpacking bags.

‘Sherry?’ she called suddenly. ‘Or something stronger?’

Clive, renouncing the idea of saying he would truly rather have tea, plumped for sherry.

‘I only have the dry.’

‘Dry’s fine, thanks.’

‘So what do you do?’ asked Mrs Radinsky, presenting him with a cut-glass tumblerful of pale sherry and a china plate of sponge fingers.

Clive explained that he was training to be a surveyor.

‘That’s nice,’ said Mrs Radinsky. With her coat and scarf off she looked younger. ‘One of my gentlemen’s a surveyor.’ She looked at Clive with her bright bird’s eyes. It was hard to say if it was knowingness or innocence in them.

Thinking of Clare Trevellyan, Clive took a plunge. ‘Gentlemen?’

‘My clients,’ said Mrs Radinsky peaceably. She leant across him, took a sponge finger and dipped it into his glass of sherry. She herself was drinking nothing. ‘They come to consult.’

In spite of Clare Trevellyan’s ankles Clive couldn’t find it in him to ask what the consultations consisted of. But here, surprisingly, his hostess helped out.

‘Horoscopes,’ she explained. ‘That and the tarot and a bit of mediuming, though I’m sick to death of that.’

‘But why only gentlemen?’ Clive burst out.

Mrs Radinsky laughed. 'Gets them going here,' she said, nodding her head. 'It's my bit of fun. They think I'm a tart, see?' She pulled an impenetrable face and got up and went out of the room, returning with a manila file.

'I've got all the correspondence here. One of my gentlemen's in the council. He keeps an eye out. Sees we don't go too far. But there's nothing they can say. I'm not breaking the law. I don't charge, see? Me on the game? Chance would be a fine thing! Want their heads examining. Have another finger?'

'No, thanks,' said Clive, who hadn't touched the plate. He extracted a crumb from the sherry, hoping it didn't seem impolite. 'Why do your gentlemen come?'

'Love, mainly. They've had a love problem and someone tells them, "Go to Rita." I've a name. Then they get used to coming, just to talk. Everyone's got troubles and I listen to them. It's not the stars, really, you know, that tells me things. It's knowing how to look. For instance, you're in love. I saw it in your face. That's why I asked you in. When's your birthday?'

'Next week,' Clive said. 'December the twenty-second.'

'Ah, Christmas boy. They either turn out easy-going or resentful. You're the first sort, I can tell. Capricorn. Let's see . . . '76?'

'1977, actually.'

'Time of birth – not that it matters, but we always ask.'

'I don't know,' said Clive. 'Morning, I think. My mother said I arrived in time for breakfast.'

Mrs Radinsky closed her eyes, fluttered the lids a trifle alarmingly and then opened them and took another sponge finger. 'Sure you won't have one? Don't blame you. They're old as buggery. My judge brought them. Lord knows how long he'd had them. Your beloved's a Gemini, born 1984. They can be slippery, Geminis, but yours'll be all right.'

'How do you know?' Picturing Clare's dark blonde hair he didn't even question that she did.

'Instinct. You came in here, didn't you? That says a lot. Not many would. I had that Mr Pullen at my door last week. Pissing in his pants with embarrassment. "Oh, Mrs Radinsky it's about them bottles." They're not mine, you know.'

'No?'

Mrs Radinsky pulled another face. 'Think my gentlemen wouldn't take mine away?'

'Whose are they?' Of course she would know.

'Ah,' said Mrs Radinsky. 'I'm not saying. Not unless I have to. I'll go so far as to say it's a Virgo. You can't trust Virgos. They come across all goody-two-shoes but they're vicious underneath.'

The following week it was the residents' Christmas party, held, to accommodate the numbers, they

graciously suggested, in the Hampshires' double penthouse. The view across London from both sides of the flat was, everyone agreed, quite superb. The pale walls were hung with discreetly lit modern paintings, the furniture was Conran, the wooden floors maple, the rugs principally white. Yes, Mrs Hampshire agreed with Susan Macclesfield, it was a trouble to keep them so spotless but then she was like that. It was in her stars. Nothing, Clive thought, as he turned away, with an upbeat of his heart as Clare Trevellyan entered the crowded room, could be less like the friendly fug of Mrs Radinsky's flat, which, he suddenly recognised, must be just the other side of the wall.

'Hi,' said Clare. She was dressed in a grey angora cardigan, a short black skirt and little ankle boots.

'Oh, hi.'

'How are you?'

Clive started to say he was all right and then said instead, 'I went to see Mrs Radinsky. Or rather she asked me in.'

'Well done you!'

'She's nice.'

'Good.'

'Not on the game at all. The idea's preposterous.' Clive had a hunch Clare would respond to this word.

'What is she then? Who are the callers?'

'When's your birthday?' Clive asked.

'June the tenth. Why?'

'Is that Gemini?'

'Yes.'

'And how old are you?'

'Twenty-six,' said Clare. 'What is this? A Spanish Inquisition?'

'Will you marry me?' Clive asked. 'I'm twenty-nine tomorrow, by the way.'

Clare said she thought she might but she had better sit down first.

Later, in bed, he said, 'You know, the Hampshires' flat is right next to Mrs Radinsky's in the next block?'

'So?'

'So I'm a surveyor, or will be. Old Hampshire's been sucking up to me since the meeting. Tried to find out what would be involved in extending their flat laterally.'

'Ah.'

'I think she's pretty safe, though. Rita.'

'Rita now, is it? I'll have to watch her, given what we are so reliably told about her!'

Clive patted Clare's bottom appreciatively. 'She'll like you. She saw you.'

'Saw me?'

But he had heard something. 'Hang on. There's a hell of a noise outside.'

They got up and, together relishing their nakedness in the December cold, stared out into the wintry

darkness. A figure over by the bins straightened up and looked furtively about. Clive opened the window.

‘Oh, Mrs Hampshire,’ he shouted down. ‘What a lovely party. We did enjoy ourselves. But we should have helped with all those bottles, instead of leaving them to you.’