False Impression

Jeffrey Archer

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VICTORIA WENTWORTH sat alone at the table where Wellington had dined with sixteen of his field officers the night before he set out for Waterloo.

General Sir Harry Wentworth sat at the right hand of the Iron Duke that night, and was commanding his left flank when a defeated Napoleon rode off the battlefield and into exile. A grateful monarch bestowed on the general the title Earl of Wentworth, which the family had borne proudly since 1815.

These thoughts were running through Victoria's mind as she read Dr Petrescu's report for a second time. When she turned the last page, she let out a sigh of relief. A solution to all her problems had been found, quite literally at the eleventh hour.

The dining-room door opened noiselessly and Andrews, who from second footman to butler had served three generations of Wentworths, deftly removed her ladyship's dessert plate.

'Thank you,' Victoria said, and waited until he had reached the door before she added, 'and has everything been arranged for the removal of the painting?' She couldn't bring herself to mention the artist's name.

'Yes, m'lady,' Andrews replied, turning back to face his mistress. 'The picture will have been dispatched before you come down for breakfast.'

'And has everything been prepared for Dr Petrescu's visit?'

'Yes, m'lady,' repeated Andrews. 'Dr Petrescu is expected around midday on Wednesday, and I have already informed cook that she will be joining you for lunch in the conservatory.'

'Thank you, Andrews,' said Victoria. The butler gave a slight bow and quietly closed the heavy oak door behind him.

By the time Dr Petrescu arrived, one of the family's most treasured heirlooms would be on its way to America, and although the masterpiece would never be seen at Wentworth Hall again, no one outside the immediate family need be any the wiser.

Victoria folded her napkin and rose from the table. She picked up Dr Petrescu's report and walked out of the dining room and into the hall. The sound of her shoes echoed in the marble hallway. She paused at the foot of the staircase to admire Gainsborough's full-length portrait of Catherine, Lady Wentworth, who was dressed in a magnificent long silk and taffeta gown, set off by a diamond necklace and matching earrings. Victoria touched her ear and smiled at the thought that such an extravagant bauble must have been considered quite risqué at the time.

Victoria looked steadfastly ahead as she climbed the wide marble staircase to her bedroom on the first floor. She felt unable to look into the eyes of her ancestors, brought to life by Romney, Lawrence, Reynolds, Lely and Kneller, conscious of having let them all down. Victoria accepted that before she retired to bed she must finally write to her sister and let her know the decision she had come to.

Arabella was so wise and sensible. If only her beloved twin had been born a few minutes earlier rather than a few minutes later, then *she* would have inherited the estate, and undoubtedly handled the problem with considerably more panache. And worse, when Arabella learned the news, she would neither complain nor remonstrate, just continue to display the family's stiff upper lip.

Victoria closed the bedroom door, walked across the room and placed Dr Petrescu's report on her desk. She undid her bun, allowing the hair to cascade onto her shoulders. She spent the next few minutes brushing her hair, before taking off her clothes and slipping on a silk nightgown, which a maid had laid out on the end of the bed. Finally she stepped into her bedroom slippers. Unable to avoid the responsibility any longer, she sat down at her writing desk and picked up her fountain pen.

WENTWORTH HALL

September 10th, 2001

My dearest Arabella,

I have put off writing this letter for far too long, as you are the last person who deserves to learn such distressing news.

When dear Papa died and I inherited the estate, it was some time before I appreciated the full extent of the debts he had run up. I fear my lack of business experience, coupled with crippling death duties, only exacerbated the problem.

I thought the answer was to borrow even more, but that has simply made matters worse. At one point I feared that because of my naivety we might even end up having to sell our family's estate. But I am pleased to tell you that a solution has been found.

On Wednesday, I will be seeing—

Victoria thought she heard the bedroom door open. She wondered which of her servants would have considered entering the room without knocking.

By the time Victoria had turned to find out who it was, she was already standing by her side.

Victoria stared up at a woman she had never seen before. She was young, slim, and even shorter than Victoria. She smiled sweetly, which made her appear vulnerable. Victoria returned her smile, and then noticed she was carrying a kitchen knife in her right hand.

'Who—' began Victoria as a hand shot out, grabbed her by the hair and snapped her head back against the chair. Victoria felt the thin, razor-sharp blade as it touched the skin of her neck. In one swift movement the knife sliced open her throat as if she were a lamb being sent to slaughter.

Moments before Victoria died, the young woman cut off her left ear.

9/11

2

ANNA PETRESCU touched the button on the top of her bedside clock. It glowed 5.56am. Another four minutes and it would have woken her with the early morning news. But not today. Her mind had been racing all through the night, only allowing her intermittent patches of sleep. By the time she finally woke, Anna had decided exactly what she must do if the chairman was unwilling to go along with her recommendations. She switched off the automatic alarm, avoiding any news that might distract her, jumped out of bed and headed straight for the bathroom. Anna remained under the cold shower a little longer than usual, hoping it would fully wake her. Her last lover – heaven knows how long ago that must have been – thought it amusing that she always showered *before* going out for her morning run.

Once she had dried herself, Anna slipped on a white T-shirt and blue running shorts. Although the sun had not yet risen, she didn't need to open the bedroom curtains of her little room to know that it was going to be another clear, sunny day. She zipped up her tracksuit top, which still displayed a faded 'P' where the bold blue letter had been unstitched. Anna didn't want to advertise the fact that she had once been a member of the University of Pennsylvania track team. After all, that was nine years ago. Anna finally pulled on her Nike training shoes and tied the laces very tight. Nothing annoyed her more than having to stop in the middle of her morning run to re-tie her laces. The only other thing she wore that morning was her front door key, attached to a thin silver chain that hung around her neck.

Anna double-locked the front door of her four-room apartment, walked across the corridor and pressed the elevator button. While she waited for the little cubicle to travel grudgingly up to the tenth floor, she began a series of stretching exercises that would be completed before the elevator returned to the ground floor.

Anna stepped out into the lobby and smiled at her favourite doorman, who quickly opened the front door so that she didn't have to stop in her tracks.

'Morning, Sam,' Anna said, as she jogged out of Thornton House onto East 54th Street and headed towards Central Park.

Every weekday she ran the Southern Loop. On the weekends she would tackle the longer six-mile loop, when it didn't matter if she was a few minutes late. It mattered today.

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Bryce Fenston also rose before six o'clock that morning, as he too had an early appointment. While he showered, Fenston listened to the morning news: a suicide bomber who had blown himself up on the West Bank – an event that had become as commonplace as the weather forecast, or the latest currency fluctuation – didn't cause him to raise the volume.

'Another clear, sunny day, with a gentle breeze heading south-east, highs of 77, lows of 65,' announced a chirpy weather girl as Fenston stepped out of the shower. A more serious voice replaced hers, to inform him that the Nikkei in Tokyo was up fourteen points, and Hong Kong's Hang Seng down one. London's FTSE hadn't yet made up its mind in which direction to go. He considered that Fenston Finance shares were unlikely to move dramatically either way, as only two other people were aware of his little coup. Fenston was having breakfast with one of them at seven, and he would fire the other at eight.

By 6.40am, Fenston had showered and dressed. He glanced at his reflection in the mirror; he would like to have been a couple of inches taller, and a couple of inches thinner. Nothing that a good tailor and a pair of Cuban shoes with specially designed insoles couldn't rectify. He would also like to have grown his hair again,

but not while there were so many exiles from his country who might still recognize him.

Although his father had been a tram conductor in Bucharest, anyone who gave the immaculately dressed man a second glance as he stepped out of his brownstone on East 79th Street and into his chauffeur-driven limousine would have assumed that he had been born into the upper eastside establishment. Only those who looked more closely would have spotted the small diamond in his left ear – an affectation that he believed singled him out from his more conservative colleagues. None of his staff dared to tell him otherwise.

Fenston settled down in the back of his limousine. 'The office,' he barked before touching a button in the armrest. A smoked grey screen purred up, cutting off any unnecessary conversation between him and the driver. Fenston picked up a copy of the *New York Times* from the seat beside him. He flicked through the pages to see if any particular headline grabbed his attention. Mayor Giuliani seemed to have lost the plot. Having installed his mistress in Gracie Mansion, he'd left the first lady only too happy to voice her opinion on the subject to anyone who cared to listen. This morning it was the *New York Times*. Fenston was poring over the financial pages when his driver swung onto FDR Drive, and he had reached the obituaries by the time the limousine came to a halt outside the North Tower. No one would be printing the only obituary he was interested in until tomorrow, but, to be fair, no one in America realized she was dead.

'I have an appointment on Wall Street at eight thirty,' Fenston informed his driver as he opened the back door for him. 'So pick me up at eight fifteen.' The driver nodded, as Fenston marched off in the direction of the lobby. Although there were ninety-nine elevators in the building, only one went directly to the restaurant on the 107th floor.

As Fenston stepped out of the elevator a minute later – he had once calculated that he would spend a week of his life in elevators – the maitre d' spotted his regular customer, bowed his head slightly and escorted him to a table in the corner, overlooking the Statue of Liberty. On the one occasion Fenston had turned up to

find his usual table occupied, he'd turned round and stepped straight back into the elevator. Since then, the corner table had remained empty every morning – just in case.

Fenston was not surprised to find Karl Leapman waiting for him. Leapman had never once been late in the ten years he had worked for Fenston Finance. Fenston wondered how long he had been sitting there, just to be certain that the chairman didn't turn up before him. Fenston looked down at a man who had proved, time and time again, that there was no sewer he wasn't willing to swim in for his master. But then Fenston was the only person who had been willing to offer Leapman a job after he'd been released from jail. Disbarred lawyers with a prison sentence for fraud don't expect to make partner.

Even before he took his seat, Fenston began speaking. 'Now we are in possession of the Van Gogh,' he said, 'we only have one matter to discuss this morning. How do we rid ourselves of Anna Petrescu without her becoming suspicious?'

Leapman opened a file in front of him, and smiled.

3

NOTHING HAD gone to plan that morning.

Andrews had instructed cook that he would be taking up her ladyship's breakfast tray just as soon as the painting had been dispatched. Cook had developed a migraine, so her number two, not a reliable girl, had been put in charge of her ladyship's breakfast. The security van turned up forty minutes late, with a cheeky young driver who refused to leave until he'd been given coffee and biscuits. Cook would never have stood for such nonsense, but her number two caved in. Half an hour later, Andrews found them sitting at the kitchen table, chatting.

Andrews was only relieved that her ladyship hadn't stirred before the driver finally departed. He checked the tray, refolded the napkin and left the kitchen to take breakfast up to his mistress.

Andrews held the tray on the palm of one hand and knocked quietly on the bedroom door before opening it with the other. When he saw her ladyship lying on the floor in a pool of blood, he let out a gasp, dropped the tray and rushed over to the body.

Although it was clear Lady Victoria had been dead for several hours, Andrews did not consider contacting the police until the next in line to the Wentworth estate had been informed of the tragedy. He quickly left the bedroom, locked the door and ran downstairs for the first time in his life.

Arabella Wentworth was serving someone when Andrews called.

She put the phone down and apologized to her customer, explaining that she had to leave immediately. She switched the OPEN sign to CLOSED and locked the door of her little antiques shop only moments after Andrews had uttered the word *emergency*, not an opinion she'd heard him express in the past forty-nine years.

Fifteen minutes later, Arabella brought her mini to a halt on the gravel outside Wentworth Hall. Andrews was standing on the top step, waiting for her.

'I'm so very sorry, m'lady,' was all he said, before he led his new mistress into the house and up the wide marble staircase. When Andrews touched the banister to steady himself, Arabella knew her sister was dead.

Arabella had often wondered how she would react in a crisis. She was relieved to find that, although she was violently sick when she first saw her sister's body, she didn't faint. However, it was a close thing. After a second glance, she grabbed the bedpost to help steady herself before turning away.

Blood had spurted everywhere, congealing on the carpet, the walls, the writing desk and even the ceiling. With a Herculean effort, Arabella let go of the bedpost and staggered towards the phone on the bedside table. She collapsed onto the bed, picked up the receiver and dialled 999. When the phone was answered with the words, 'Emergency, which service?' she replied, 'Police.'

Arabella replaced the receiver. She was determined to reach the bedroom door without looking back at her sister's body. She failed. Only a glance, and this time her eyes settled on the letter addressed 'My dearest Arabella'. She grabbed the unfinished missive, unwilling to share her sister's last thoughts with the local constabulary. Arabella stuffed the epistle into her pocket and walked unsteadily out of the room.