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Opening Extract from...

The Unfortunate Englishman

Written by John Lawton

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THE UNFORTUNATE ENGLISHMAN

A Joe Wilderness Novel

John Lawton



Grove Press UK

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for the blokes
whom chance encountered

Bruce Kennedy

Artigiano straordinario

Robert Etherington

L'Uomo in una mongolfiera

I

Wilderness

§1

West Berlin: June 28, 1963

He took Berlin.

Wilderness had done stupid things in his time. Stupid things. Unforgivable things. The only person who would not forgive him this time was Wilderness himself.

He took Berlin.

Why, after all this time, had he got involved with Frank Spoleto again? Was once not enough? Had he not learnt the lesson? You can lead a horse to water but you'll never make him trust anyone called Frank?

He took Berlin.

It was a ludicrous scheme from the start . . . to smuggle a nuclear physicist, a veteran of the Manhattan Project, out of East Berlin using the same tunnel they had used to smuggle coffee, sugar, and God-knew-what during the airlift in '48. Ludicrous? Crazy. Just asking to get caught.

He took Berlin . . . Berlin took him . . . Wilderness was in the Charlottenburg nick, on the Ku'damm. He'd denied everything. He wasn't at all sure how long he could keep this up.

Shooting Marte Mayerling had been a mistake. She'd slipped behind him dressed as a rubble lady, a *Trümmerfrau*, and he'd shot on instinct, shot on memory. For a moment, too long a moment, he and Nell Burkhardt had stood riveted to the spot, unbelieving, her hand wrapped around his. Then the mirror cracked and he had ripped up his shirt to stuff a finger in the dam wall and stanch the flow of blood. Nell had got rid of the gun. Surely she had? With any luck it was gone for good. He'd never see the gun again. He'd never see Nell again.

Berlin took him.

A squad car. An ambulance. A vanload of coppers. Then the slow crawl, hand on horn, honking a way through the surging crowds of Kennedy supporters back to the Ku'damm. A grey cell and black coffee.

As coppers went, this lot were civilised. No one had hit him, no one had so much as raised their voice to him. He had not asked for a lawyer; he had simply asked, repeatedly, that they charge him or let him go. For all his time in Berlin he still had no idea how long they could hold him. Only when the shift had changed and a day copper, a burly sergeant in his forties, had recognised him from the old days just after the war—"You used to sell me black-market NAAFI coffee. You *und* liddle Eddie. *Im* Tiergarten"—did it begin to seem inevitable that a chain of connection and causality would be set off that would lead him to this moment. The moment Burne-Jones walked in.

"You should have sent for me at once."

"I resigned two years ago. You surely haven't forgotten?"

"You know, Joe, when I have your balls in my fist, sarcasm is really rather ill advised."

"Alec, I would never have sent for you. It's all too . . ."

"Too what? Too bloody familiar?"

Wilderness could not deny that.

It wasn't just familiar; it was almost a carbon copy. Tempelhof, or thereabouts, that cold autumn of 1948, the height (or was it depths?) of the blockade. Lying in a makeshift, prefab hospital in the American Sector with a Russian bullet in his side. Rescued, promoted to a rank he'd never surpass, and thoroughly bollocked.

"Sign here."

"Eh?"

"Sign on the dotted, Joe, and all this will just go away."

Wilderness read the page in front of him.

"So . . . I'm re-enlisting?"

Burne-Jones said nothing. Just stared back at him, accepting no contradiction.

Wilderness turned the page around to show him.

"There's a typo. The date's wrong. You've typed 1961 instead of 1963."

"Just sign."

"If I sign this, it's as though I never left. It's dated the same day I resigned."

"Quite."

"Quite my arse. It means all the time I've been here I have technically been working for you."

"And how else do you think I could get you out? The West Berliners want your guts for garters. You were found with a half-dead woman clutching a smoking gun."

"No, Alec, that is not the case. There was no gun."

"Oh. Got rid of it did you?"

Wilderness said nothing.

"Well . . . it will put in a ghostly appearance when these dozy buggers get around to testing your clothes for powder residue, so I suggest we get out now. They won't like it; after all it's a stark reminder that they don't run their own city and that what we and the Americans say counts for a damn sight more than what the chief of the West Berlin Police says. Sign, and it, whatever it is, becomes an Intelligence matter. Sign and walk, or keep up this nonsensical surliness and get charged with attempted murder."

Wilderness signed.

The sense that once again Alec Burne-Jones had him by the balls was palpable. A tightening in the groin demanding all the flippancy he could muster.

As they stepped out into the summer sunshine on the Kurfürstendamm, Wilderness blinked, looked at Burne-Jones and said, "You owe me two years' back pay."

And Burne-Jones said, "Joe, how exactly did you get rid of the gun?"

§2

The zoo, West Berlin: June 26

Marte Mayerling might well die. Wilderness dropped the gun, threw off his jacket and tore at the tails of his shirt to stanch the flow of blood from the wound in her side.

Nell seemed frozen, standing over him in silent shock.

Marte Mayerling was far from silent.

"So, he shoots me . . ." over and over again, a mantra of delirium, the deathly high that is blood loss.

"Nell . . ."

"Joe?"

"Take the gun. Take my passport and go."

Nell snapped out of her trance and rummaged in his jacket for the passport.

Wilderness took his hands off Mayerling for a moment, the blood surging up again, slipped out of his shoulder holster and threw it to Nell.

"Get to the zoo station, call an ambulance and then disappear."

"Disappear?"

"Nell, vanish . . . you were never here."

He pressed down on the wound. Mayerling's insane chant grew softer and softer. She might die on him any minute and the only plus to that scenario would be her silence. She might die before the ambulance arrived. She might die just to spite him.

Time melted at his fingertips. He had no idea how long he leaned on her. His hands went numb. Fifteen minutes? An hour? It seemed to him an age since she had spoken. He heard the sound of sirens approaching, and Mayerling stirred again, one last croaking complaint of "He shoots me . . . so he shoots me . . . " Then they were there, a white-suited ambulance crew, a huge Daimler ambulance and seconds behind them West Berlin coppers in their tiny Opel, guns at the ready.

§3

West Berlin: June 28

"Not going to tell me, eh?"

They headed back along the Kurfürstendamm to the Kempinski Hotel. The summer light still striking Wilderness like pinpricks after a day and a half in windowless cells. He wanted out of the ill-fitting

clothes the West Berlin Police had lent him when they'd stripped him of the remains of his blood-soaked suit. He wanted a bath and breakfast. Burne-Jones wanted answers he was never going to get.

"Alec, there was no gun when the cops got there; that is all you need to know."

"Fine, Joe. Just tell me they'll never find it. They're dredging the Landwehr. Tell me it's not there."

"It isn't. All coppers are thick. German coppers might be thicker than most. I'm not. Dump it in the canal? Not bloody likely."

Coffee never tasted so good. A delightful morning scorch. There was a time, an age ago, when Wilderness had smuggled so much coffee the smell clung to him, unscrubbable, and set dogs barking in the street. And for a while he found he could not bear to drink the stuff. He brought home exotic teas, stolen from the PX or the NAAFI . . . Jacksons of Piccadilly's "Finest Earl Grey." Nell had asked who Earl Grey was. He'd no idea, now or then.

The dining room at the Kempinski was almost empty. They caught the last shift of waiters serving breakfast, and over scrambled eggs and croissants he told Burne-Jones as little as he thought he could get away with.

Every so often Burne-Jones would put a hand to his forehead as though about to mutter "Jesus wept," but he never did. Wilderness did not mention the fifty thousand dollars Frank Spoleto had promised him, now floating off up the Swanee. He did not mention Nell, and in conclusion, dismissed his attempt to smuggle Marte Mayerling, nuclear physicist, from East Berlin to Israel as "a bit cockamamy."

At last Burne-Jones said, "Frank Spoleto cooked this up?"

"Frank . . . and the Company."

"It's not as cockamamy as you might think. Not that I could see our people approving, but it has a certain . . . *je ne sais quoi* . . . a certain 'balls' to it."

"Do our people need to know?"

Burne-Jones strung this one out. It seemed to Wilderness that he wanted to inflict some semblance of punishment on him—the price of rescue.

"Need to know? No. Do they know? That's a tricky one. The copper who recognised you went through channels to find me. Showed

initiative, contacted 'our man in Berlin,' Dick Delves, whom I can assume you assiduously avoided . . ."

"Damn right I did."

"But I have no idea how many ears pricked up between here and London at the mention of your name and a dead German woman."

"She died? I thought you said 'half-dead'?"

"No . . . half dead is half alive after all. 'Dead' was just an assumption on someone's part. She pulled through. She's in the hospital on Kantstraße. You probably saved her life. I gather they pumped endless pints of blood into her and she's stable. Nobody knew her name, she had no papers on her, and you were saying nothing, but when she came to she told them she was Hannah Schneider, and I assume that was the cover name you or Spoleto assigned her. I wasn't wholly sure who she was until you just told me."

"Shocking, isn't it?"

"Quite. And I rather think I have to get you out of Berlin before honesty overtakes her and she tells the coppers who she really is."

Wilderness could not think why she hadn't told them already.

"I need a little time."

"You don't have any time."

"A day, two at the most. There are loose ends. You have been telling me for nearly twenty years now never to leave loose ends."

"Joe, go back to London. Go back to London and look to your marriage."

"To my marriage?"

"Why? Do you think I could conceal from my own daughter that you were in jail?"

"We've both of us a cellarful of secrets from our wives."

"Quite. But this could not be one of them. Go home and repair your marriage."

The inherent conflict between the roles of boss and father-in-law had almost never surfaced in the eight years Wilderness had been married to Judy Jones. It required juggling, and juggle they both did. But it sat like a stubborn knot in the old school tie between them now. Wilderness wondered which Burne-Jones he was appealing to as he said, "Tomorrow, I'll get myself back to London—tomorrow. I'll fix whatever needs to be fixed. But if you spirit me away today, it will come back to haunt us."

Burne-Jones abandoned the attempt to stare him down, got up from his chair all but sighing, and whispered a parting "My God, Joe. What have you done?"

And from where Wilderness sat that seemed all too familiar.

§4

He could have let her die. He could have let her die but the thought had not crossed his mind until now. He could have walked away and let her die, vanished into the crowds chanting "Ken-ne-dy!" and no one would be the wiser. But the thought had not crossed his mind until now.

He walked the half mile to the hospital, the litter from the Kennedy celebrations strewn everywhere, blowing in the wind, gathering in the gutters. He'd glanced at the front page of the *Tribune* in the bar at the Kempinski. JFK's rapturous reception, the made-for-TV tag line "*Ich bin ein Berliner*." And he could hear Nell's voice in that. Her habitual cry, her ethical position, her reason to come back to the ruins of Berlin summed up in four words. He could see the last of Nell, walking—no, running—away from him as he knelt over Marte Mayerling, nursing the wound he'd inflicted on her.

Now—looking down at Marte Mayerling. Still and silent, a drip in her right arm, an oxygen tube clipped to her nose. A nurse who had told him to keep it brief.

Her eyes flickered open, took in the man before her.

"Again, Mr. Johnson? Again? What could you possibly want with me?"

She spoke in English. Just as well. Wilderness wanted as few people as possible within earshot to understand what he or she might say.

"What can you possibly want from me?"

"Not much. Just to see with my own eyes that you were alive."

"So, you didn't mean to kill me?"

"I've only ever killed one man. And the only man I've ever wanted to kill killed himself before my eyes."