Magic Flutes

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Extract

Prologue

(Birth of a Hero)

They were both born under the sign of Gemini, and for those who believe in the stars as arbiters of fate this must have seemed the link that bound them. She herself was to invoke the heavens when at last they met. '*Could I be your Star Sister?*' she was to ask him, '*Could I at least be that?*'

Certainly it would seem to need the magic of star lore to link the life of the tiny, dark-eyed Austrian princess – born in a famous castle and burdened, in the presence of the Emperor Franz Joseph, with a dozen sonorous Christian names – with that of the abandoned, grey-blanketed bundle found on the quayside of a grim, industrial English town: a bundle opened to reveal a day-old, naked, furiously screaming baby boy.

Her birth thus was chronicled, documented and celebrated with fanfares (though she should have been boy). But his . . .

It was the merest chance that he was found at all, for

the bundle was half-concealed by sacking and the Tyne docks that mid-morning in 1891 were high-piled with packing cases waiting to be loaded on the boats for Scandinavia, with rusty barrels, coils of rope and coal from the barges. But among the shawled and clogged women on their way to work on the Fish Quay there was one who had sharp ears and detected above the screeching of the gulls another, more frantic and urgent cry.

An hour later, in the Central Police Station in Newcastle upon Tyne, the contents of the bundle had been recorded in the register, found to be the fourteenth foundling abandoned in the city that month and noted to be male.

By the evening, the baby was in the arms of the matron of the Byker orphanage where, duly fed, bathed and clothed in the calico nightdress stitched by the ladies of the Christian Gentlefolk Association, it caused that excellent woman a certain puzzlement.

Bald, shading from puce to apricot and back again under the impact of his rage, the baby, squinting at her with the lascivious eyes of a Tunisian belly dancer, seemed to be made of a different, a denser, substance than any she had known. She was sure she had never seen a baby that sucked at its own wrist with such ferocity or screwed up its legs with such violence, and as she lowered it into the twelfth cot from the left she was already aware that the question she so often asked about abandoned babies, namely 'Will it survive?' was inappropriate. If there was a question to be posed about

this latest addition to her orphanage, it was rather, would they survive him?

Matron followed her instincts about the occupant of cot number twelve when naming the baby, and rejected the list put out for her guidance by the Board of Governors. The compressed and explosive individual whose irate face appeared so incongruously above the scalloped edges of his nightgown was clearly no Albert or Edward and certainly no Algernon, and 'Attila the Hun', though suitable, was unlikely to be acceptable to the gentlemen on whom her livelihood depended. She called the baby 'Guy', and for his surname used that of a group of islands off the Northumbrian coast which she had visited as a child with her fisherman father: the Farnes.

A relative lull followed while Guy Farne primed his muscles, co ordinated his limbs and secured a few basic necessities in the way of teeth and hair. Then, some three months earlier than expected, he began to crawl and subsequently to walk. Life had now begun in earnest.

Speculation about the ancestry of their babies was something that Matron and her hard-working assistants seldom permitted themselves. Not one of their foundlings had ever been traced or claimed, and in turning them out to be clean, God-fearing and suitable for work as domestic servants or labourers, the staff of the orphanage was doing all it could. With Guy Farne, however, it was different. As he progressed from child-battering to arson, including a little grievous bodily

harm and possession of unlawful weapons on the way, there was an attempt to prove that this particular baby could not possibly have been English.

'Well, he doesn't look English, does he?' argued Matron's assistant. 'And him being found in the docks like that. I mean, there's boats from all over come in there.'

'Aye. He could be anything with those cheekbones and his eyes set like that.'

'There's all sorts you find where there are ships,' agreed cook. 'Even Lithuanians,' she added darkly.

A tendency to blame Lithuania increased amongst the staff of the Byker orphanage as Guy Frane reached the age of three, four, five . . .

'Though you can't really say there's any actual malice in him,' said Matron, bandaging the leg of a fat girl he had bitten in the calf. 'I mean, Maisie was bullying little Dora.'

This was true, but the staff found it cold comfort. It was also true that when Billy was carried in with concussion because Guy had knocked him against a brick wall, he had been tying a tin can to the tail of a puppy that belonged to Matron's sister. And that Guy had stolen a gold watch from a corpulent governor's back pocket only to present it immediately to the aged boilerman who had a birthday. True, all true – but when Guy reached his sixth year Matron decided that enough was enough and looked about for a suitable victim.

Her choice fell, as in the manner of fairy stories, on a poor widow named Martha Hodge.

Mrs Hodge had lost her husband when very young in an accident in one of the shipyards; since then she had fostered, very successfully, one little girl with partial hearing for whom she had found a job with a kind lady as a housemaid and another girl who was now working happily in the country. Matron accordingly wrote a letter in her neat copperplate to Mrs Hodge, suggesting that she might like to foster another child and reminding her that the three and six paid weekly by the parish had now risen to a munificent five shillings, enabling those who took up fostering to make a reasonable profit.

Mrs Hodge had not found this to be so, but she nevertheless put on her hat and coat and on arrival at the orphanage told Matron respectfully that she was willing but it had to be a little girl.

'For without a man to help me, Ma'm, I divn't think I can deal with a wee lad.'

Matron repressed a sigh and said she saw her point. 'However, if you'll just look at the boy now you're here?'

Guy was led in, glowering, and stood before her. At the time of this encounter he was six and a half years old. Entirely without hope or expectation, he looked at Mrs Hodge. Small for his age, with the extraordinary air of compactness that characterized him, his chin lifted to receive the information that he was not acceptable, he waited. His knees, scrubbed to a godly cleanliness, shone scarred and raw; his naturally springy hair had been slicked down with several

applications of vaseline and water and stuck relentlessly to his scalp.

Mrs Hodge looked at him and felt frail and tired and more mortal than usual. Force emanated from this strange-looking boy as visibly as beams from a light-house. It was impossible; she would never be able to cope with him.

The boy waited. His eyes, strangely and slantingly set above high cheekbones, were a curious deep green which sent Mrs Hodge in search of images that were beyond her: of malachite, of the opaque and clouded waters of the Nile.

Silence fell. Only the sudden descent of his left sock as the garter snapped revealed the tension that the child was concealing.

It was entirely without volition that the words Mrs Hodge now uttered issued from her mouth.

'All right,' she said, 'I'll have 'im. I'll give it a try.'

She had turned to the Matron as she spoke, and it was a few moments before she turned back to look at the boy. When she did so, she had to catch her breath. The child had not moved from where he stood, nor did he smile, yet he was utterly transformed. The mouth, sullen no longer, curved upwards; the clenched fists had unfurled, and everything about him, every line of his body, seemed to express joy and a wholly unexpected grace. Most movingly of all, there had appeared in the strange green eyes a glimmer of the purest, the most celestia, blue.

It was then she suspected that she did not stand a chance.

The first month which Guy spent in Martha's 'back-to-back' in the narrow, cobbled road beside the shipyard passed in unnatural quiet. Every child knew that fostering or adoption was on a month's trial. Memories of cowed and defeated children returning with their bundles to the orphanage had been burned into Guy's mind when he was scarcely four years old. On the last day of February he packed his belongings, crept downstairs and said, 'I'm ready.' It was always thus with him – to anticipate the worst, to be prepared.

'Ready for what?'

'To go back,' said the little boy.

'Go *back*?' said Martha. 'Whatever for, you daft boy? Don't you want to stay?'

Guy did want to stay. By the time he had made this clear, his eyes undergoing that characteristic change from green to blue, Martha found herself knocked backwards on to the horsehair sofa, with broom sent flying and hairpins clattering on to the floor.

His violence and aggression now took a different direction. In the orphanage he had fought against the world, now he fought for Martha Hodge. When she explained that kicking, biting and twisting the limbs of children who had fallen foul of her in some way just would not do, he taught himself to box; applying first aid to the bloodied noses of his victims, Martha wished she had held her tongue. Whether or not Martha, long

widowed and still comely, would have wished the fishmonger to kiss her when he came up the cobbled lane with fresh herrings was never put to the test, for no sooner had the tradesman's arms encircled her waist than Guy shot out from the coal bunker and – forming himself into a human battering ram – sent the unfortunate man sprawling.

School, for which Martha had thirsted like a spent hart for the thicket, provided scant relief, for despite returning with his behind in weals from the cane Guy still seemed to have enough energy left for hours of mayhem before she got him into bed. Nevertheless, it was from this small, red-brick building between the slaughterhouse and the glue factory that deliverance came. Two years after Guy had come to her, Martha was sent for by the headmaster.

'He's a devil, Mrs Hodge,' said Mr Forster. 'A thoroughgoing, copper-bottomed fiend in hell.' He embarked upon a recital of the damage that Guy Farne had inflicted in his short time at Titley Street Board School. 'However . . .'

Martha, lifting her head at the 'however', was then informed that her foster-child had a remarkable capacity for learning: had, in short, more brains than any child that had passed through Mr Forster's hands in twenty years and could, in his opinion, win a scholarship to grammar school.

She came home, burst into tears and was discovered thus by Guy. Though disappointed that what she wanted of him was something as humdrum as a schol-

arship, when he was prepared to raise an army or build a fleet, Guy applied himself. Going out with her rolling pin one day to rescue a neighbour's little boy who was pinned against the sooty brick wall of the shipyard, Martha discovered that the child was warding off not Guy's threatened blows but his determination to explain the Second Law of Thermodynamics; then she knew that the battle was won.

When he got his scholarship, there was a street party and Guy, now sporting a black blazer with a tower on the pocket, went to the Royal Grammar School. Soon he became, as such children do, bilingual in English and Geordie. His passion was for science, but he had an ear for languages and the kind of maths-and-music brain that gives tensile strength to this type of high intelligence. He still fought at the slightest provocation, but now there were sports to channel his energy and though he was too wary to make friends, friends – cautiously – began to make him.

The scholarship to Cambridge was a surprise to no one except Guy himself. He went to Trinity for natural sciences, and Martha, just as she had braced herself through the years of his childhood for the reappearance of his lost parents, now prepared herself to let him go, without complaint, out of her life.

These preparations were unnecessary. No one was ever to come forward and claim kinship with Guy, nor did Guy himself now show the slightest signs of turning his back on his past. Though he spent the long vacation getting such work as he could to help pay for his clothes

and extra expenses, he returned each Christmas and Easter, changing as the train steamed over the Tyne Bridge into his old ways and old dialect as easily as one changes coats. At nineteen, Guy Farne was still on the short side, still trailing his extraordinary strength and compactness as though his muscles were of a different clay. The springing dark hair, the pointed ears which Martha had bandaged to his skull in vain, combined with his high cheekbones to give him that puckish, foreign look which in the orphanage had been laid at the door of the Lithuanians, but his wide mouth and strong chin recalled a simpler, more pastoral heritage. Guy's eyes, during those years at Cambridge, were seldom without the glint of blue which signalled the well-being of his soul as he came into his own in scholarship, in sport and friendship. Only women he left alone, knowing – as men whose sexual power has never been in doubt do know – how to wait.

He got a First and went to the University of Vienna which, in the year 1911, was unrivalled for its work on the conduction of metallic ions through water. Martha Hodge never knew what happened during that year for which he left bursting with confidence and from which he returned, green-eyed and taciturn, with the information that he was no longer interested in academic life and had thrown up his studies. That he had been deeply hurt was obvious; that it was by a woman she did not find it difficult to guess. Wisely, she held her tongue and received with her usual quiet attention the information that nothing mattered except to be extremely rich.

The first million, they say, is the hardest. Guy made his by selling to the house of Rothschild (one of whose youthful members he had known in Vienna) a detailed and audacious scheme for the forward purchase of options on cargo shipping rights. Based on the prediction of a war which, owing to the almost equal balance of power in Europe, would be long, and presented to the amazed old banker in a red student's exercise book which was to become a family heirloom, it provided at minimum risk – for the down payments to the shipping companies were to be regarded as interest-free and recallable loans – an opportunity to corner the charter market within five years.

Extorting his reward, under the threat of publishing the details of his scheme, Guy left for South America where he spent three months exploring the backward and mineral-rich Minas Cerais. Within a year he had extracted an option on the mining rights of the Ouro Preto range from the Brazilian government, offering in exchange foreign investment and the building of roads and schools for the Indians. It was not the gold and emeralds which were his chief concern, but the cobalt, for he foresaw the western world's insatiable demand for high-grade steel.

Thus, in those first years, he established a pattern which was to make his success a legend: the use of his scientific training to predict events, the nerve to back his hunches and the direct and practical entrepreneurism of the man on the spot; for he was always to return to the

products of the earth's crust and the adventure of their extraction.

By the time war came, he had a facienda on the Amazon and a diversity of interests from oil to real estate, but he chose to honour his commitment to the Indians and it was 1916 before he returned to England. Resisting the efforts of the War Office to recruit him on the staff, he joined the Northumberland Yeomanry, fighting with a detached ferocity directed not at the enemy but at the blundering fools who had made the war. A year later he was invalided out with a shattered leg and a Distinguished Service Order and set about forming his own investment company. By now he had a retinue, an international reputation and offices in a dozen capitals, but Martha Hodge – as he returned at intervals to install first running water, then electricity, then a bathroom into the house she resolutely refused to leave – continued to be troubled by the colour of his eyes.

Then, in the spring of 1922, he returned to Vienna.

1

Guy returned to the capital of a dismembered empire: a city impoverished by defeat, in the grip of inflation but still beautiful. The theatres were open, the concert halls were packed. The Viennese still danced, still sang. Sometimes, as the new republic struggled with the shortages and disruptions left by the war, they even ate.

Guy took a suite at Sachers, saw that his stenographer and chauffeur were suitably housed nearby and allowed himself a week of the swashbuckling entrepreneurism that was his hallmark, wresting the copper concessions in the Eisen Gebirge from an Armenian syndicate after a spectacular battle, and gleefully beating a South African tycoon to the lignite deposits near Graz. After which, considerably refreshed, he presented himself at the Treasury and plunged into the work which had brought him to Vienna.

It was work shrouded in secrecy, as vital and exacting as it was outwardly unspectacular. For Austria was seeking a huge loan from the League of Nations, seeing

in this her only chance to stabilize her currency and set off along the road to recovery. It was to assist the new republic in presenting her case to the League that Guy had been sent out by the British government, who feared that a permanently weakened Austria would seek union with Germany; no one seeing him, day after day, courteous and patient, would have imagined how irksome he found the ponderous bureaucracy and time-wasting social functions in the stuffy, grandiose rooms of the Hofburg.

Then, on a fine Saturday at the end of March, Guy, obeying a summons from his young secretary David Tremayne, left the city, dismissed his chauffeur and turned his car southwards towards the fortress known as Pfaffenstein. This is the most famous castle in Burgenland, an emblem for the whole of Austria, embodiment for close on a thousand years of defensive power, aggression, grandeur and pride.

The position alone is breathtaking. At the head of a dark green lake whose glacial waters chill the blood even in midsummer, is a great pinnacle of rock rising skyward from the pines which cling to its base. To the east the crag, split from top to bottom by a fault in the rock, drops sheer to the Hungarian plain. To the north are the wooded slopes and jagged peaks of the Pfaffenstein mountains whose passes it dominates; to the west, sloping more gently, are the vineyards and orchards which merge in the far distance with the snow crown of the Alps.

On the summit of this gigantic eyrie, the last outcrop

of the Pfaffenburg spur, the Franks built a fort at the time of Charlemagne, but even they were not the first. Two hundred years later, the Crusaders added a square of turreted towers, threw a drawbridge over the dizzying ravine to the east of the castle and rode out full panoplied against the infidel, bearing aloft the banner of the Pfaffensteins with its impaled griffin and crimson glove.

By the time Richard Coeur de Lion was brought there, pending his imprisonment at Durenstein, Burg Pfaffenstein was a thriving Romanesque citadel with a council chamber, a chapel and a village clinging humbly to the base of its crag. In subsequent centuries, as the Tartars invaded Hungary, the Hungarians invaded Austria and the Turks invaded both, its fame and importance increased as steadily as the power of its owners who became, by conquest and marriage, first counts, then margravines, then princes.

The rout of Sultan Mahomet's troops after the second siege of Vienna, which banished the Turks for ever from Christendom, set in train a riot of new building as cannon bastions and barrier walls were blown up and the years of imperial splendour under the ever mightier Habsburgs were reflected in Pfaffenstein's steadily increasing grandeur, opulence and pomp. Ignoring, but never quite managing to erase, the dungeons built deep into the rock, the torture chambers and oubliettes of the earlier fortress, the princes of Pfaffenstein built a palace along the southern front, the windows of its great state rooms sheer with the crag as

it rose above the lake; blasted terraces out of the rock and threw pepper-pot turrets on to the flanking towers. A musical Pfaffenstein built a theatre, an Italianate one arcaded the courtyards, a prince of the Church enlarged the Romanesque chapel to form a soaring, gilded paean to the glory of God.

Larger than Hochosterwitz, more heavily fortified than the Esterhazy palace at Eisenstadt and far, far older than the castles that the poor mad Swan King Ludwig had built to the north in Bavaria, Burg Pfaffenstein by the end of the nineteenth century had become the subject of innumerable paintings and the inspiration of countless minor poets. The redoubtable Baedecker, when he arrived, gave it three stars.

To this castle, driving himself in his custom-built, tulip-wood Hispano-Suiza, came Guy Farne on a spring afternoon in 1922, with a view to purchase.

He came, as all who come from Vienna must, by the road which skirted the western side of the lake and as the fantastic, towering pile reared up before him, his wide mouth curved into an appreciative smile.

'Yes,' he said to the young man sitting beside him, 'it will do. Definitely, it will do. You've done well, David.'

His secretary, David Tremayne, whose fair good looks and puppyish desire to please concealed a tireless efficiency, turned a relieved face to his employer. 'I thought you'd like it, sir. I saw a few others but I don't know . . . This one put them all in the shade.'

'It certainly makes its own quiet statement,' said Guy sardonically.