lovereading.co.uk

Dirk Bogarde

John Coldstream

Published by Phoenix

Extract is copyright of the Author

Prologue

'I think you and I have the measure of each other'

At about noon on Saturday, 8 May 1999, Sheila MacLean, holding a glass of white wine, took the few paces from the kitchen to the drawing-room window of the fourth-floor apartment in Chelsea where she had been living for a little over two years. On the way she placed the glass, as usual, on a table next to a wheelchair which, for most of the day, rested just inside the open doorway and faced towards a slim, neglected balcony, then south across a tidy communal garden with its tall trees, to the upper reaches of the reddish-brown buildings 150 yards away, and to the Light. The all-important Light.

For the moment, however, the Light was not a priority. At this time of day the occupant of the chair liked to watch the television news, no matter how lowering its content. In a way, the more ghastly the better: the mess man is making of the world was always a stimulus for a decent argument at the lunch table. Sheila switched on the set – a large device, out of proportion with its surroundings – and tweaked the curtains across to shade the screen. As she did so, the man in the chair began to cough. 'You've choked yourself on that sweetie,' Sheila said, with a hint of the scold. She had in mind the chocolate bonbon which a visitor had brought at teatime the previous day. She turned round to see the man, still coughing slightly and with the triumphant look of a schoolboy who had scored a point against his teacher, holding between his outstretched right forefinger and thumb a small object. It was the sweet. Sheila laughed and returned to the kitchen, leaving her charge to his Frascati and his baleful news. The coughing ceased.

'I swear to God I was in there no longer than 20, 30 seconds, max, and something came into my head,' Sheila would recall, much later. ' "Something's gone wrong." ' She went back into the drawing-room and found the figure slumped in his chair. 'He was gone. That first cough must have been the beginning of an embolism in the chest – no pain, nothing, just a little cough. You couldn't ask for a better death.' Despite what she knew in her heart, and despite his instruction from the outset that he was not to be resuscitated, the instinct of the skilled nurse compelled Sheila to go to work. She put him on the floor and checked that nothing was lodged in the throat. Then, with the head

back, ready for mouth-to-mouth, she began pulmonary resuscitation:

> At the first couple of major pushes on the chest, there was a big influx, a noise of breath going into the lungs, and an attempt to inspire, to inflate them. All the time I'm doing this, I'm saying, 'Not like this. It's too much for everybody. For *me* – it's too sudden for me, too.' I kept going for about twenty minutes. For a while I felt like he was trying to come back. Then that stopped, and this communication came to me, almost as if he spoke directly into my ear. It said, 'That's enough, Sheila, stop now. I'm out. It's OK, it's not as bad as you think. It's OK.' I swear to God, I stopped like that – as if somebody had taken my hands off him.

She stepped towards the telephone in the hall. 'I was sort of communicating then to him myself, "OK, if you're out, make it go right. Don't get stuck. Keep moving." ' On the one hand, her own distress and the implications of what had happened were hitting her hard. On the other, 'It was all calm, completely calm. Really, really easy.' She had the presence of mind not to dial 999, with the attendant risk of publicity. Instead she called the owner of the nursing agency, Angela Hamlin, and said, 'Come quickly, he's gone.' Then she rang the doctor, Peter Wheeler, who immediately abandoned the weekend chores which had taken him to his attic in south London. Finally, weighted with apprehension, she contacted the family. As her fellow professionals took over, Sheila packed her belongings in the smaller of the two modest bedrooms, summoned the lift, and left 2 Cadogan Gardens for ever.

Not for the first time she had been present as a life ended. However, the conclusion to this one was a severe shock, both because of its suddenness and because the relationship with the man in her care had assumed an intensity and significance more powerful than that of a love affair. Sheila MacLean, a straightforward, plain-speaking, no-nonsense, humorous woman from County Donegal, believes that in some unfathomable way she was sent to prepare Dirk Bogarde for what, in the circumstances, would be the best possible death.

When they met in the spring of 1997, Sheila had returned recently to nursing after six years working on the rehabilitation of prisoners with drug and alcohol problems. She was reluctant to take on a long-term residential commitment, but agreed that she would if necessary spend six weeks living-in before going 'non-residential'. After about a week with a patient, she was told by Angela Hamlin: 'There is somebody else, a celebrity who lives close to Sloane Square. We've been trying to find placements for him, but I suppose the delicate way of saying it is that he is difficult to suit up with people.' Sheila, who guessed the identity immediately, was unenthusiastic; she had admired some of Dirk Bogarde's best and most serious films, but was wary of 'celebrities'. The portents were not favourable when she and her employer visited the flat.

She found, in effect, another prisoner: at that point, Bogarde used the word about himself. A man who for most of his seventy-six years had zealously fostered his independence was now trapped by physical incapacity and was wholly dependent. A public figure famed for an impenetrable privacy was reliant on others in his most intimate moments. A seemingly self-assured, controlling, even manipulative, and above all supremely competent human being had been reduced by a stroke to acute vulnerability. He was depressed and resentful. His left side was paralysed. He required physical support. 'She's quite small,' said Angela Hamlin when she saw him appraising the new arrival, 'but she's very strong!' The patient needed that reassurance.

Sheila knew right away that here was somebody with whom she could empathise. 'He was quite irascible. But what struck me more than anything was that his character was really obvious, over and above the physical problems. Illnesses operate on all kinds of different levels. People can use illness, sometimes quite obviously, sometimes much more covertly, to control situations. And I have to say that right from the start I didn't feel that about Dirk. Because of that, that level of empathy was really strong from the start.' She established quickly that although Bogarde was depressed by his predicament, the essence of what he was had survived:

> The big thing was a sort of old-fashioned, gentlemanly good manners – integrity, old English values, things that people don't consider to be of any moment really. I saw those in Dirk in a way that I'd never seen in anybody else. I know all that is to some extent a contrivance, but it was so much part of what he *really was* that one couldn't help but identify with it and feel that it was something really important. The other aspect was that he was unique and had contributed a lot and he still had something to say and do. And that is when it became clear to me that I should stay longer than six weeks. I thought: 'To hell with this, I'm not going to be able to walk away.'

Once or twice, Bogarde asked what Sheila's plans were, and received a non-committal reply. During lunch one day he again broached the subject. 'He said, "You know, it is getting close to the six weeks. What is it that you want to do? Because it is really important to me." And I said, "Well, I think I could stay on a wee bit longer." I didn't want to overdo it. And he said, "You have no idea how much of a relief that is to me. Because in all honesty I think you and I have the measure of each other." And I understood exactly what he meant. Because I did think that was true – that we did have the measure of each other.'

The importance of this association so late in Bogarde's life cannot be exaggerated. The following pages will demonstrate that until Sheila MacLean moved in to take care of his needs, he had only ever had one sustained involvement with another person living at close quarters. All the other, deepest friendships were at a remove; perhaps out of necessity, as in the war – and usually at a considerable

geographical distance – but almost invariably out of preference. It was safer that way. Yet this unexpected meeting of minds in the late nineties was to prove profoundly salutary.

Mercifully, the stroke had not impaired his intelligence and wit. He was handicapped, but not in pain. There was no progressive, wasting illness, his greatest dread. He could carry on a sort of life. Conversation, company, even a little written work, were still possible. More important, however, was the gift of time, to enable a 'Coming to Terms' – the title of a chapter in his final volume of memoirs. 'Those last two years,' says Sheila, 'were valuable for whatever a human being has to do – to contemplate who and what he was. He didn't have to pretend anything. He didn't have to affect a certain way of being.' So he stripped away all artifice, all performance. He divested himself of those who sapped rather than revitalised him. Just as in the sixties he had come to relish the challenge of young co-stars with nothing to lose, so he continued to revel in a verbal joust on equal terms. He told Sheila that he needed her 'energy'. He was referring not solely to the physical drive which resulted in him standing, even walking a few steps, when his faithful physiotherapist of many years had tried without success; no, he also required Sheila's capacity to take it and to dish it out. His sense of mischief was unabated. At the table in the hall where they had their meals the politically correct received short shrift and his provocative sallies about race, the clergy, even friends of long standing, were answered with equal force. There was electricity in the conversation and he enjoyed being wound up as much as being the winder-up.

So, against the odds, spirits were high when Lauren Bacall came to call on the Friday afternoon of that fateful weekend; it was she who gave him the sweet. Bogarde was in a more positive mood than at any time since the stroke. He had begun to read another book for review. He had even talked of sitting for a photographer friend. The American actress stayed for more than an hour and, as she left in a taxi, commented to Sheila on what 'great shape' he had been in. Less than forty-eight hours later she was telling *The Daily Telegraph*'s arts correspondent how she had found Bogarde 'in terrific form and feeling very sharp'. By now she was talking about her late friend.

Sheila had no premonition, but in retrospect realised that she had seen in others a 'big surge' of optimism just before they died. This patient, with whom she had made a conscious decision to become involved, to help beyond the normal constraints of her occupation, had become reconciled with himself. His business was done. Thanks in large measure to the woman with whom he found himself sharing his life for the last two years, he could leave painlessly and peacefully by the door at the far end of his own private corridor.