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Mrs Queen Takes the Train

Written by William Kuhn

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Mrs Queen Takes the Train

William Kuhn

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For Fritz Kuhn

Part I



Warrior Two

Several years ago, on a dark afternoon in December, Her Majesty Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland, and Her Other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth of Nations, Defender of the Faith, Duchess of Edinburgh, Countess of Merioneth, Baroness Greenwich, Duke of Lancaster, Lord of Mann, Duke of Normandy sat at her desk, frowning at a computer screen. The desk had once belonged to Queen Victoria. Its surface was polished but uneven, like many other pieces of furniture in Windsor Castle, so the computer keyboard wobbled when The Queen pressed on it. She folded a piece of paper into a tiny square and slipped it underneath a corner.

The keyboard was one thing, but the computer itself was another. She expected it to work, but in her experience it was just as bad as the keyboard, though the reasons were more mystifying. It was always locking up just when she found something she thought she might like to see. She had been instructed to look for the cursor when this happened. Even though the young woman who handled information technology for the Privy Purse had helped her increase the magnification of the screen, her diminished eyesight made it difficult to find the tiny flashing bar, which she understood she was meant to move around with the mouse, which wasn't a mouse at all, of course. Why was it called

that? She pressed what she took to be an appropriate key and the screen changed color. She tried another and the document she'd been working on (a memoir of her favorite horse, Aureole, who'd nearly won the Derby in 1953) disappeared. She punched a third and the computer emitted a startled *beep*. She sat back against her chair and sighed with frustration.

She had already called the IT woman three times. She couldn't call her again. The Queen knew she needed help, but she hated to appear helpless. Everyone around her seemed to know what they were doing on the computer. She was the only one who didn't. When computers had first begun to be commonplace she thought she could leave them to the experts. Pen and ink and paper would see her out. She wouldn't need to learn. But she was wrong. Now it wasn't only the young who consulted the computers that were apparently inside their mobile telephones, it was also the butler who entered her choices for luncheon on a computer in the cupboard, the private secretary who communicated with Number 10 via what was called instant messaging, and even the Mews posted online films of mares foaling. It had dawned on her that she was going to have to learn the language if she didn't want to be left behind. She had had what she thought of as endless lessons. And still, learning how to manage the machine was more difficult for her than learning Chinese. She'd learned a few words of that with no trouble for the Chinese state visit a few years ago.

She stood up from her desk and looked out the window, up the Long Walk in the Home Park toward the statue of King George III. An old Boeing 747 which had just departed from Heathrow lumbered into the air above the Castle, rattling the

windowpanes. The sound was briefly deafening. The Queen had grown so used to this that she seldom noticed. She supposed that if one's back door opened onto the railway into Waterloo, one also became accustomed to the noise of the trains. When the wind was in the northeast, the air traffic controllers always sent the planes taking off over Windsor. She didn't mind the noise. It was like a mini weather report. When she did notice the aeroplanes, three minutes apart, she thought to herself, "Ah, wind from the northeast." No, the noise didn't bother her, but something about being thwarted by the computer, and the impossibility of asking for more help, did bother her. She felt tired. She sat down dispiritedly in one of the chairs next to the unlighted fire. "Oh, Little Bit," she said to herself, "what now?"

People had been writing about her from the very day she was born in April 1926. The newspapers had reported her learning to talk. "Lilibet," they wrote, was one of her first words, a small child's pronunciation of her own name, Elizabeth. That was entirely wrong, as reports about her often *were* wrong. Actually, it came from a cake that she had been served one teatime in the nursery. It had pink, raspberry-flavored icing. Her eyes lit up when she saw it. Nanny told her she might only have "a little bit" of the cake if she were a good girl. "Lilibet! Lilibet!" she'd cried and Nanny had reported this to her mother. "Lilibet" had nothing to do with Elizabeth, but it was a name that had stuck, and she'd grown up with it as the diminutive people in her family persisted in calling her. It was a tease really, a pinch, a reminder that it was undignified for a princess to be greedy for cake, not the sweet nickname people thought it was. Nevertheless, she even used it with herself from time to time,

especially when she blamed herself for doing something wrong. She forgave Nanny for telling her mother about the cake as she connected the one with treats and the other with teases. She could recall Nanny taking her on the train to Sandringham all by herself one Christmas. What a treat that was!



Sometimes it amused her to pick up a recent biography and to annotate it. The librarian had once shown her some nineteenth-century biographies in the archives that her great-great-grandmother had annotated. Queen Victoria had written in the margins, in her distinctive sloping hand, "I never did," or "Not true," alongside the passages to which she objected. Inspired by the example of her predecessor, The Queen would correct errors in the margins herself. Lately, however, she hadn't the energy. Did it matter to get things right anymore?

She knew that sitting alone in her chair, thinking gloomy thoughts, and staring blankly off into space made things worse, but she couldn't help it, no more than she could have stopped eating the pink cake if Nanny hadn't been there to prevent her when she was a little girl. Only her internal nanny told her that sitting alone in her chair doing nothing was bad for her. Still, the part of her that felt rather sad was stronger than her internal nanny, more than a match for her, really.

No one had warned her that she might lose confidence as she grew older, and it was true that many of the things she'd known how to do formerly without a second thought, such as asking for help, she couldn't bring herself to do now. She also worried more than she used to. A sheet of paper delivered the evening before to her sitting room with the coming day's list of engagements sometimes made her lose sleep. She wondered what would happen if a Lady Mayoress chatted too much at the unveiling of a plaque and made her late for the luncheon at the factory she was scheduled to visit next. Would they lose patience with her, as she nowadays sometimes lost patience with herself?

Enough of this. Nanny suddenly got the upper hand. She shook herself out of her fit of anxiety and heaved herself out of the chair. She stalked toward the computer on the other side of the room as if it were game and she meant to shoot it. A sudden burst of creative energy gave her an idea. She reached over and turned the damned thing off. Then, a moment later, she turned it on again. She suddenly recalled the woman from IT doing this. "Yes," she said under her breath, "turn it *off*. Then on again." The machine whirred into action, flashing several screens which she could not in the least comprehend. After several moments, however, a screen appeared that did look familiar. It had several vertical rows of symbols on it. She recognized the symbol for the Web browser: she knew if you clicked on that you could what was called "surf the net." The IT woman had a bit of Italian and had told her the Italians said "*navigare in rete*," which The Queen liked better, as she silently amended it to an Italo-English pidgin phrase, "navigate in rot." That's what

she liked to think of the so-called wonders that were available online, a lot of rot.

It was Prince Edward who'd begun to indicate a few things on the computer that were not rot. First he'd shown her the website of the Household Cavalry. Splendid young men. Scarlet tunics. Groomed mounts. Brave boys. Then he'd shown her a page for the Royal Mews, where a mare was giving birth to a foal. He'd shown her a little place on the right-hand side of the screen where you could move the cursor, press it, and then a short video of the foaling would play. Superb animals. Remarkable little film. He'd also shown her (he knew his mama's bad habits) a website where she could place a small bet on the races. The site itself was too complex for her to understand entirely, but she kept coming back to it, studying the race meetings, the odds, and the names of the runners, promising herself that one day she might place a small bet, no more than five pounds.

Prince Edward had also shown her how to save websites, under a heading at the top of the screen labeled "Bookmarks." He'd shown her how to save places there for Google and Twitter, which she silently called "Mr Google" and "Miss Twitter," as their names seemed to have been invented for a nursery story. He'd also called up different screens for Yahoo and Facebook. She didn't see the point of what she called to herself "Yah-Hoo." How was it different from Mr Google? She didn't like to interrupt him, as Prince Edward was so evidently proud of what he was showing her. Facebook he showed her at the same time as he attempted to demonstrate what she thought he described as "cutting and pasting," though there were no scissors. She didn't

understand that at all, confused it with Facebook, and started thinking of the two as somehow related, "Pastebook." It made her think of being a little girl and sticking pictures into a large scrapbook with a big pot of paste.

Prince Edward had created an account for her with Miss Twitter. He asked her what she would like as a username. She looked at him blankly. "What do you want to be called on Twitter, Mummy?" he said with some exasperation. "Little Bit," she said, and he'd entered that as her Twitter name and then come up with the idea of using the Buckingham Palace postcode as her username, @SW1A1AA. In fact there hadn't been time for her to do much exploring, but she'd made a few notes on the back of a used envelope she reclaimed from the wastepaper basket as he'd talked. She gathered that she had to "follow" other people with Miss Twitter if she were to learn what everyone was talking about. She also understood that to follow people, to read what they had to say, she had to click on a little colored square at the top labeled "Who to follow." She sat down again cautiously, grasped the mouse as if it might shock her, and then, when it didn't, selected Twitter from among her bookmarks. She began entering the names of people it might be interesting to follow. Typing with her two index fingers, she put in "Boris Johnson," and @MayorofLondon came up with a photo of a handsome blond, now past his prime and a little stout. "Bit of a belly he has now, Mr Johnson, didn't used to," The Queen thought to herself. "An amusing fellow." She looked at the text that had been entered, and it was all PR bumpf from the mayor's office.

Next she put in "Duchess of Cornwall" and up came a photo

of Camilla next to @DuchessCornwall. Here the text was more interesting, absurd, rather funny actually. Camilla had described herself as "Future Queen of England. One does like to chat with the public . . . but from a safe distance. Lover of Horses and Gin." All that was true enough, thought The Queen to herself, except the "Future Queen of England" bit. There were still some legal niceties to be sorted out there. She didn't think it was very wise of Camilla to write about the gin, however. She made a mental note to have a word with her. As a Twitter novice, The Queen was so far unaware that many people posted Tweets pretending to be people they weren't.

The Queen then entered her own name and @Queen_UK appeared. The text here, however, made her indignant. Every day, for the past several weeks it appeared, at six p.m. @Queen_UK had tweeted "It's gin o'clock!" She wondered whether Camilla was already daring to tweet as Queen of England. The gin did seem to be a telltale motif. She'd have to ask Sir Robin to take a look at this. What annoyed her still more was that The Queen did rather like gin herself. She didn't think she'd ever abused the green bottle of Gordon's, however, just long ago got in the habit of having a cocktail before supper. Usually the same one. Only one. Couldn't hurt. In fact she found it helped a great deal.

The gold clock on the chimneypiece struck a bell indicating the half hour. Late afternoon in Windsor. Monday after breakfast she'd have to go back to London. Business. The office. She had a full week of engagements ahead, she reflected with a Sunday-afternoon sigh. Before that, however, her yoga instruc-

tor was coming for her weekly lesson. Prince Edward had also introduced her to yoga. He'd also told her how much he enjoyed what he described as a combination of meditation and exercise, how Sophie Wessex had got him started, how good it felt to have one's muscles stretched, how even an octogenarian like his mother might feel the benefit. She'd cautiously agreed to a trial. With anyone else she would have laughed and said, instantly, "No," but she had a soft spot for her two younger sons, whom she'd managed to protect from some of the public attention she'd lived with all her life. An instructor had turned up and now The Queen had been doing her yoga practice for several months. She found it did calm her down. She always walked more slowly and deliberately afterwards. But some of the poses were more difficult than others. And the instructor expected her to remember them from week to week. There were only a few she had memorized. She decided to try out a few of them before the instructor arrived, to warm up a little.

The Queen stepped out of her patent-leather shoes. She then walked across the Turkish carpet in her nylons and stood in front of a long mirror at one side of the room. The Queen had no vanity whatsoever, so her appearance didn't interest her in the least, but she did feel she needed the mirror to check the shape of her body while she was practicing the poses. She recalled one of her favorites, where she stood with her back foot at a right angle to her body, facing forward, front knee



bent, arms outstretched before her and behind. She thought she might get into this pose and hold it, breathing steadily, to the count of sixty. She hitched up her skirt slightly and, as she assumed the pose, she heard in her mind's ear the instructor proclaiming: "Warrior Two!"



Shirley MacDonald was a practical woman who was nearing sixty. She lived in part of a small grace-and-favour cottage in the Home Park at Windsor. This was a flat she occupied for free by the "grace and favour" of The Queen, so long as she was employed in the Royal Household. She would be turned out when she retired. Windsor suited her, really, and she thought that when she did retire she might try to buy a large enough house so she could do bed-and-breakfast for day visitors who didn't feel like going back into London after a day of seeing the parts of the Castle that were open to tourists. She also had a room she could use overnight in Buckingham Palace when she needed it for work. She hadn't enough money saved to buy a place in London, and she'd miss that, as she loved everything about London, but she was philosophical and resigned to spending her retirement somewhere not too far removed from the Castle walls.

Shirley was the most senior of The Queen's dressers. She was a ladies' maid who served, technically, under the Mistress of the Robes; an aristocratic woman who had that title turned up only for ceremonial occasions. She was, in Shirley's view, useless. Shirley had no time for this particular palace archaism,

but she'd learned to put up with it. Shirley herself had plenty of work to do. She drew The Queen's bath in the morning, and sometimes in the evening too. She cared for the whole of The Queen's wardrobe, from the heavy mantle she wore for the Garter service in June to the country clothes she wore on weekends. She cleaned, catalogued, and repaired everything The Queen wore. On a daily basis she laid out her shoes and underthings, her dresses, jackets, and jewels. Usually The Queen emerged from the bath in her dressing gown about half past eight. Shirley would appear from behind a screen. "Good morning, Your Majesty."

"Good morning, Shirley," not unfriendly, a little perfunctory. Then they'd have a little conversation about the weather, and Shirley would give as an excuse the growing coolness of the autumn for a heavier wool skirt she'd laid out. The Queen seldom wanted something different from what Shirley had chosen for her to wear. Whatever she wore The Queen regarded as not unlike a uniform. She put on pearl earrings in the same spirit that a policeman did up his silver buttons. They were part of the job. They indicated who she was. They were not pretty things for her ears. They were her name badge. "I'm Mrs Queen."

Shirley respected The Queen, but she was not in awe of her. Shirley's grandmother had been a laundress at Balmoral, and she remembered her forever mending the edges of frayed sheets, even on weekends, even at home. Shirley's mother had come south to work in the kitchen for the royal family. Shirley had seen the insides and outsides of all the royal residences since she was a girl, and that was precisely why she'd been offered a job

close to The Queen. She was familiar. She wouldn't bolt. She wouldn't sell her story to the *Daily Mirror*.

If The Queen took no particular joy in her clothes, Shirley did. She adored the weights placed in the hems of her skirts so they'd hang properly and protect her from embarrassment on a windy day. She loved the lining of the coats, usually chosen in a contrasting but complementary color. A plum-colored jacket made of raw silk had a green-apple lining that no one ever saw but the dressmaker (who was proud of her craft), The Queen (who seldom noticed), and Shirley (who liked to hold the jacket's tart interior up to the light).

Shirley was friendly with one of the senior butlers, William de Morgan, who would sometimes stop by her room as she was at the ironing board, steaming out a few creases. His method was to come in her ironing room smiling ear to ear, surprised, and happy to see her. Then he would point to something of interest outside the window. "That's a thunder cloud if I'm not mistaken!" When she turned to look, he whipped the purple jacket off the ironing board and before she could even turn around to protest, he'd put it on and stood proudly before the mirror, imitating some of The Queen's well-worn sayings. "Have you come far today?" "Good morning, Shirley." "That will be all, William."

"Give it here, William," Shirley said, noticing how much more proudly William wore it than The Queen did. It made him taller, more erect. He glowed in it. The Queen always put on her jacket with something of a repressed sigh, an elderly knight putting on his armor. But for William the jacket was a shaft of sunlit magnificence.

Unlike Shirley, William could not point to generations of royal service in his family. He'd grown up in a postindustrial town with no particular prospects or talents except a love of opulence and the daring to add a "de" to his name when he was in his twenties. He'd seen an exhibition of Victorian tiles by an artist of the same name. It sounded much more impressive than "Bill Morgan," which he'd been called since he was a boy, so he went to the registry office and took it for his own. It was, after all, only a small change. He also worked hard. He'd worked for two other members of the royal family before he was taken on by The Queen. Before that he'd spent a decade working for a duke, then for a sheik, after having been a waiter at Brooks's and sommelier at Wilton's. He knew wine and food. He knew how to sense what someone might want in the instant before they knew it themselves. For him there was nothing humiliating or degrading about service. It was his religion. It was what he knew how to do well. He was proud of it. He left all these places with warmly satisfied employers who were sorry to see him go.

Working for the Royal Household didn't pay as well as these other positions, but it had a prestige the other places hadn't, and William was a connoisseur of prestige. He knew the difference between the daughter of a baron and the daughter of an earl. He knew how to address the envelope of a letter to each, a distinction that confused most people in modern Britain, when it didn't actively annoy them. He could distinguish between a supermarket game bird and a pheasant that had been properly aged and hung. He could see at a glance whether a man's suit was off the peg in a shop or made by a tailor.

The monarchy spurred his imagination in a way that used to be widespread in the late Middle Ages, but had now faded to a loyal few. The Queen coming into a room gave him an electric shock which he had to work hard to conceal. A photograph of Prince Harry changing his shirt in Afghanistan made his mouth dry. A view of the Royal Standard whipping in the wind above Windsor Castle caused his heart to race.

Much of this he did not share with Shirley. They both voted Labour. They were both devoted to their work, but if for William the monarchy was poetry, for Shirley it was prose. She put in long hours and was getting to the age where she noticed being on her feet more than she used to. If The Queen had a formal event in the evening that would require a change of clothes, Shirley found her chattier than in the mornings. Shirley would brush out her hair before The Queen dressed in an evening gown. She remembered very well when The Queen had first explained to her that she would be meeting a few people she didn't know well in the evening and would Shirley mind reading out their *Who's Who* entries so The Queen could ask in an informed way about their children or wives or parents. It was something Queen Victoria used to do, and The Queen liked to do it too.

If she were tired in the evenings, Shirley tried not to show it, as The Queen was more than twenty years older than she was, and she continued to keep up a brisk pace, or had until recently. In the last months or so, The Queen had seemed to slow down perceptibly, to be feeling not quite herself, to be a little more somber than was usual. Shirley noticed this, but it was one of

the rules of her job that she would never bring it up unless The Queen brought it up herself. Shirley was quite certain that she never would, so she was surprised one evening as the autumn darkness extended that The Queen did bring it up. It was a Sunday in Windsor. Shirley would return with The Queen to Buckingham Palace on Monday after breakfast and stay in a room there, as The Queen had a busy week ahead starting on Tuesday and the other dressers were on holiday. The Queen sat in silence as Shirley brushed vigorously through her hair. After a few moments, The Queen asked Shirley whether she remembered "Miss Julie Andrews. *Dame* Julie Andrews, as she now is," added The Queen.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"I made her DBE a few years ago."

"A good thing too. You don't always give honors to those that deserve them." Shirley sometimes used a little exaggeratedly rough talk with The Queen because she liked it, just as she liked rough strokes of the brush. They'd worked together long enough for Shirley to feel confident about speaking her mind on some subjects.

"Well, it's the Government, of course. I don't choose most of them myself."

"The Order of the British Empire for David Beckham. What did that young man do to deserve it?"

"He's a very good footballer, Shirley."

"He may be, but I don't think he deserves the OBE for kicking a ball about."

The Queen changed the subject. "Julie Andrews, now. Do you remember that song of hers? From a film? I believe she

played an excellent nanny." The Queen's voice grew warmer on the word "nanny."

"*Mary Poppins*, Ma'am?"

"Not that one. The other one."

"*The Sound of Music*?"

"That's it! It was a song about her favorite things." The Queen could still command a surprising soprano, and she sang out tentatively, "When the dog bites . . ."

Shirley replied in a voice that was closer to a throaty baritone, "When the bee stings."

"When I'm feeling sad," sang The Queen, her voice cracking slightly on "sad."

"I simply remember my favorite things," answered Shirley.

"And then I don't feel so bad," the two women ended in unison. They made eye contact and giggled lightly.

"And what are your favorite things, Mrs MacDonald?" continued The Queen after a pause.

Shirley was wary of replying to this. She was unmarried, having given her whole life to royal service, but the palace preserved the antique custom whereby the most senior members of the female staff were all called "Mrs." It was an old-fashioned way of showing respect, even though it was very much out of step with the age of women's liberation. The palace pretended not to know that the title "Ms" had even been invented. When The Queen called Shirley "Mrs MacDonald," it was a kind of diminutive. It was affectionate. But she almost never asked for personal information, and to ask Shirley to name her favorite things was very unusual indeed. Shirley guessed that The

Queen was looking for some way of speaking about what was bothering her. She also could list with confidence some of The Queen's favorite things, so she decided to answer with something that might plausibly be on her list of favorite things, but which was certainly on The Queen's list too.

"Well, Ma'am, I did enjoy working on *Britannia*."

"Oh yes," answered The Queen, as if an invisible bell had just been rung. "Have you been to visit her?"

"No, Ma'am, I haven't."

"Moored at Leith, I believe."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"A pity."

Shirley thought it best not to reply to this. She'd seen the



pictures of all the royal family on the verge of tears at the yacht's decommissioning in 1997.

"Not a tear for Diana," one of the tabloid newspapers had put in a rude caption beneath the photo, "but we all blubbed buckets for *Britannia*." "To blub" was a verb Shirley had heard The

Queen use before. It was one of those unusual words, not unlike her monogrammed drawers, that had an Old World feel to them.

"How do you suppose one gets there?"

This took Shirley by surprise. The Queen never in her recollection asked for directions. "Edinburgh, Ma'am?" said Shirley incredulously.

"No, no. Not Edinburgh. I know how to get *there*. I mean to Leith."

"Well, there must be a bus, or a local train from the railway station, Edinburgh Waverley."

"A bus. What number?" The Queen replied instantly. She was said to be a very rich woman, but The Queen, in Shirley's experience, hated spending money. She always wanted her clothing repaired, or cut up for other uses, before she'd give in to the proposal that something new should be bought. She particularly hated spending money on new clothes. She insisted on wearing certain Norman Hartnell and Hardy Amies outfits she'd worn since the 1970s, though they were several times repaired and beginning to show signs of their age. Shirley had successfully managed to confine The Queen's wearing them to the days she wouldn't be in the public eye.

Shirley replied, "I don't know what number. Shall I inquire?"

"No, don't do that," said The Queen with some energy and shifted the subject to the weather. In three minutes, however, she returned to it. "And what is the fare nowadays on an Edinburgh bus?"

Shirley was so surprised that she hadn't time to reply "I have no idea," before The Queen rushed forward with "You see, some

men from the Edinburgh Council are coming to the investiture on Thursday. I'll need something to speak to them about." And with that The Queen signaled an end to their chat by taking a dog biscuit out of her pocket and holding it in the air until it caused a small riot among the sleeping dogs, who all woke up and began yapping.



Several months earlier, at the very beginning of that autumn, The Queen had still been in Scotland, delaying her return to London as long as possible. A late Scottish September next to the river Dee can be unusually sunny and warm. The Queen liked to order a "picnic" luncheon at one of the outlying cottages on the Balmoral estate. These were often damp, uninhabited little places with long views of barren hillsides. Though uncomfortable, they had a kind of stark glamour. Some members of the Household regarded lunching there as a dubious treat. An equerry would go out early, taking bottles of spirits and wine. He would build a fire in order to warm the place up. If it were an unusually sunny day, he would move a table outdoors for luncheon. A butler would follow to lay the table and bring along wicker baskets of cold poached salmon and grouse pie. Ultimately, The Queen herself would turn up around one or half past one in the afternoon, with a lady-in-waiting, whatever private secretary was on duty, whoever happened to be staying in the Castle, and the occasional invited neighbor. They had a drink standing up in groups and then sat down at the table, six, or eight, or sometimes even ten.