

The Conjuror's Bird

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Published by Hodder &
Stoughton

Extract

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I

Thursday Night at the Taxidermist's

That Thursday evening I was working late, removing the skull of a dead owl. It was December outside but at my workbench the heat from the lamp was making my fingers sweat. I was at the hardest part of the whole operation, the bit where you have to ease the skull very gently down the neck without damaging the skin, and as I began to work it loose I found my eyes were blinking with the concentration. But I could sense it was working, that I was doing it well, and when I heard the telephone grumbling at the back of the workshop I decided to let it ring. It was too late for a summons to the pub and even though I'd taken down the sign and removed myself from the Yellow Pages, the five-pint pranksters ('I've got this chicken that needs stuffing . . .') would still occasionally get through. This was their time to call but tonight I wasn't in the mood. Until I remembered Katya and changed my mind.

Katya was the latest student to rent the flat at the top of the house. It was always students because I kept the rent low to make up for any dead animals they might meet in the hallway. They were prepared to overlook a bit of that because the location was central and because my students in the Natural Sciences department were prepared to vouch for my character. Students will overlook a great deal if you have a reputation as a rebel and, in a painfully earnest, save-the-world department, I qualified by riding a motorbike and by refusing to toe the university line on current conservation theory. It was that easy.

The top-floor flat was self-contained. Katya and I had a

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front door and a staircase in common and very little else – in the couple of months since she'd moved in we'd exchanged some polite smiles and rather fewer words. Every ten days or so her mother would ring from Sweden and I'd dutifully take down a message on a yellow pad and leave it at the bottom of the stairs, along with the suggestion that Katya might give her mother the number of the upstairs phone. The next day the note would be gone but her mother would continue to ring downstairs. She was a polite woman, struggling slightly with her English, struggling not to let any anxiety show. I felt sorry for her. Which is why, even though the owl was just beginning to fall into line, I peeled off my gloves and answered the phone.

It wasn't Katya's mother.

It was a voice I hadn't heard for fifteen years. A scarcely remembered, totally familiar, soft, low voice.

'Fitz,' it asked, 'is that you?'

'Gabriella.' A rhetorical statement, if such a thing is possible.

'Yes, it's me. It's been a long time, Fitz.'

It wasn't clear if that was a reproach or an apology.

'Yes, a long time.' The words came out sounding defensive.

'Though I got your letters.'

'You didn't reply.'

'You know I'm not a great one for writing.'

She couldn't deny that. I was famous for it.

'Look, Fitz, I'm over in London for a few days and there's someone I want you to meet. He's a collector and he's got quite a good story to tell. I think you'll be interested. What are you doing tomorrow?'

I looked at the remains of the owl on the workbench. It would just have to take its chance in the freezer.

'I think tomorrow is reasonably free,' I concluded.

'Good. Can we say seven in the bar at the Mecklenburg? It's off Oxford Street, just by Selfridges.'

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How like Gabby to realise that the Mecklenburg Hotel was not among my usual drinking venues.

‘All right. Seven tomorrow . . .’

‘It will be good to see you. I’ve told Karl that if anyone can help him you can.’

‘Karl . . . ?’

‘Karl Anderson.’

‘Ah, yes. The collector. I’ve read about him. What sort of help would that be?’

She paused. She had never liked talking over the phone.

‘Not now. Wait for tomorrow. But I promise you’ll be interested, Fitz. It’s about the Mysterious Bird of Ulieta.’

She was right, of course. I *was* interested. In all sorts of ways. Abandoning the owl to the darkness, I climbed the stairs to the room where I did most of my living. It was an untidy, comfortable room, warmly lit and smelling of old paper. The bed was permanently unmade and the desk was littered with notes for a book I wasn’t really writing. Some of them were noticeably dusty. One whole wall was taken up with shelves of carefully ordered books but I didn’t need to look anything up to know that Gabby wasn’t being melodramatic. Despite its name the bird was real enough, or it had been once. I’d even made some notes about it for an article, back in the days when I was going to be famous.

And now, all these years later, she wanted to ask me about it. She and her friend Karl Anderson. I’d seen a picture of them together once, taken by a mutual friend about three years earlier at one of the big summer lectures in Salzburg. She was leaning very lightly on his arm, still dark and slim and calm, still with that familiar half-questioning smile.

I settled down on the bed and looked thoughtfully at the small trunk in the corner of the room. What they wanted to know was probably in there along with everything else – the

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dodo, the heath hen, the passenger pigeon, the lost and the forgotten, all mixed together – years of jotted notes and observations still waiting to be given a shape.

But instead of thinking about them, I thought about Gabby and the man she wanted me to meet. I'd read a lot about him over the years but everything I knew really came down to three things. That Karl Anderson was a man with a reputation for finding things. That he was used to getting what he wanted. And that nowadays he was far too successful to do his searching in person unless the stakes were very high indeed.

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of him.

I checked my watch and realised I could still just catch the pub.



Journeys begin in many different ways. It was Cook, a man experienced in preparations for a long sea expedition, who persuaded Joseph Banks to return to Revesby before they sailed; so that in the summer of 1768, two months before they were due to depart, he made the journey back to Lincolnshire; back to the woods and fields that for the next three years were what he thought of when he thought of home.

The summers before the *Endeavour* set sail seemed lonelier to her than the winters. Each summer day she spent alone was haunted by a sense of joy wasted. And against the uncertainty of her future she began to paint, as if she might trap and keep each day by its details. The transit of Venus, which he travelled so far to observe, was less to her than the passing of the seasons in the Revesby woods.

Friday at the Mecklenburg

It was raining heavily by the time I reached the Mecklenburg Hotel. By abandoning the bus at Oxford Circus I arrived wet and out of breath, but at least I was on time. The hotel turned out to be an ugly building, concrete on the outside and expensively mock Edwardian beyond the revolving doors. I stood for a moment in the lobby, dripping on the carpet, slightly disappointed. Then, suddenly self-conscious, I followed a sign to the gents where I dried my hair and pushed it into some sort of order. When I'd finished I looked better but still underdressed. Amongst academics I considered myself reasonably stylish. Here I just looked like someone who might steal the towels.

I paused in front of the mirror to collect my thoughts. It was hard to imagine what Anderson might want. The bird from Ulieta was an enigma, one of nature's conjuring tricks – a creature that had disappeared as if with a wave of the hand. But this disappearance had been final and there would be no coming back. The audience was left looking for feathers that had long ceased to exist. Not even Anderson could do much about that.

Upstairs, in the Rosebery Bar, despite the cigarette smoke there was a smell of perfume and leather. Not the sort of desiccated leather that featured in my jacket and parts of my shoes. This leather was new and expensive and smelled soft, if that's possible. Its effect was to make me aware of the smell of rain I'd brought in with me. Among these dry, groomed people it was the odour of not quite belonging.

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Gabriella was easy to spot. She was sitting in a corner under a soft lamp, framed in best cinema style by a twisting curve of smoke. She was, as before, dark and slender, so neat as to seem flawless. She was wearing a slim black dress in a fifties style, but in her case there could be no question of being out of place. She had slipped into this time of Chanel and soft leather with the same maddening grace that she might slip into a taxi. Beside her, behind the smoke, was a tall, blond man in his early fifties, squarely Scandinavian, constructed in straight lines. A good-looking man. He was turned to Gabby and talking quite eagerly as I edged hesitantly towards them, past a group of pre-theatre Americans.

Then Gabby looked up and noticed me.

‘Hello, Fitz,’ she said quietly as I arrived at their table, and suddenly I was annoyed with her for not having changed and annoyed with myself for noticing. And annoyed that somewhere on my right an impeccably suited arm was being advanced to shake my hand.

‘Fitz, this is Karl Anderson,’ she said, as if that would make it all right.

I nodded at him, not caring much, and turned back to Gabriella. She was so startlingly familiar it was hard to breathe.

‘Perhaps we should all sit down?’ suggested Anderson calmly. ‘I’m sure Mr Fitzgerald would like a drink.’

He was right. A drink was exactly what I wanted.

And so I sat down at the small round table and joined in a painfully well-mannered conversation that tiptoed carefully around any awkwardness. A waiter brought me a beer, and more drinks were ordered. I was aware of Gabby sitting next to me, close enough for my hand to fall on hers if I let it drop from the table. The new drinks arrived almost immediately – Anderson was drinking as quickly as I was and ordered deft

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refills whenever our glasses were nearly empty. I watched him while Gabriella told us about the lectures she was about to give in Edinburgh and Munich. A tall, well-proportioned man, seven or eight years older than me but not looking it – a maverick, a charmer, a big personality in a dusty discipline.

Beside him, Gabriella seemed tiny, like a bird. It was as if she'd slipped through the years without friction, her freshness and vitality untouched. She must have been ten years younger than the big man next to her, and yet they matched. They made a good-looking couple.

'So what are you doing with yourself these days, Mr Fitzgerald? Your withdrawal from field work is a great loss to us all.' He was a Norwegian by birth but his English was only very slightly accented and very perfectly pronounced.

'Oh, I keep myself busy. Teaching mostly. "Natural History: the historical context" – the Greeks and Romans, early naturalists, the Darwinian controversy. That sort of thing. It's a compulsory module, so the students have to turn up, even if I'm no good.'

'And are you good?'

'Well, I'm controversial, which is the next best thing. My first lecture is "The Taxidermist as Hero". I always enjoy that one.'

At that moment Anderson was diverted by the waiter and Gabby caught my eye.

'I'm glad you could come, Fitz,' she said, and she sounded as if she meant it. Personally, I was withholding judgement. It wasn't until the third drink was beginning to have an effect that Anderson turned to the subject we'd all been waiting for.

'You must be wondering why I'm here, Mr Fitzgerald, intruding on this meeting of old friends.'

I raised an eyebrow to acknowledge the question but didn't reply, so he carried on.

'I was lucky enough to hear Gabriella speak in Prague a few

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years ago and we have been friends ever since. She mentioned you to me as a man with a great deal of knowledge in one of the areas I am interested in. I am also, of course, aware of your grandfather's work.'

He paused to put his glass down neatly on its paper coaster. I waited for the commonplace compliment that usually came with any mention of my grandfather but none followed. Instead Anderson leaned forward and lowered his voice.

'I am a collector, Mr Fitzgerald. I am here because I am looking for something incredibly rare. Something that may not even exist any more. Gabriella thinks you may be able to help me. It is well known you are an authority on extinct birds.' His eyes lingered on my face for a moment. 'What do you know of the bird from the Society Islands, the one they call the Mysterious Bird of Ulieta?'

'Not much,' I told him calmly, truthfully. 'Rather a fanciful piece of naming, I've always thought.'

Again his intent, searching gaze.

'Not perhaps so fanciful.' He leaned back and rubbed the back of his neck with his fingertips. 'Let us talk about it a little.'

He finished rubbing and placed his fingertips softly on the edge of the table in front of him. His eyes met mine again.

'The rarest bird ever recorded, Mr Fitzgerald. Seen only once, in 1774, by Captain Cook's second expedition. A routine collecting party on a South Sea island known then as Ulieta. A single specimen captured, of a species never seen before. Preserved by Johann Forster and brought back to England. No bird like it ever found again, on Ulieta or anywhere else. Extinct before it was ever really discovered.'

He paused and his eyes dropped to the table top where he ran one fingertip across a drop of liquid, shaping it thoughtfully into the shape of an X.

'I'm sure none of that is new to you, Mr Fitzgerald. On his

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return Johann Forster gave away the preserved specimen. The *only* specimen. The only specimen ever found. Of course he had no way of knowing its rarity then. Nor did the young man he gave it to, the naturalist Joseph Banks.'

He looked up at me again and now there was an excitement in his eye that had not been there before.

'Yes, Mr Fitzgerald. It is two hundred years since that one specimen went missing from Banks's collection. No one knows what's happened to it. I think it's time it was found, don't you?'



He came to realise later that discovery was not a science. That summer his journey to Revesby was slow and troublesome, but despite the great heat his thoughts were of the southern ocean. The *Endeavour* was close to readiness and his mind turned easily to the voyage ahead. Yet gradually, as the miles passed, the shapes and shadows of his own country began to gather him back, until in the last few miles he found his heart began to beat a little faster and his eyes reached forward for a glimpse of home.

When it came, the old house was waiting for him, its arms spread wide as if to embrace a prodigal. At first the mellow stone against the trees seemed to exist quite on its own, but at the sound of his carriage people began to spill out in welcome: familiar, friendly faces whose greetings were already tinged with goodbyes. In the days that followed he found his journey was the subject of every conversation, and every person who spoke of it took care to speak confidently of his return. Revesby, it seemed, was proud and anxious in equal measure. That night there were lights and dancing. Gentlemen flushed by music and wine thumped his back and wished him luck and noticed how brightly his spirits shone. And they were right. He felt strong and vital and talked of great discoveries, and when the music played he danced wildly and often. The gentlemen's daughters were a blur to him: bright satins, soft hands, and always a hush of whispers behind him, speculating and excited. By day, while the house drowsed in the heat, he left the talk behind him and set out on foot for the cool of the woods.

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He knew she was there, in the woods, before he saw her. At first she was only a movement, some way off, as if a deer had shadowed away from the corner of his vision. Later he found twigs broken and grass cushioned into a hollow. Then, on a day when the sun was bright, he saw her at a distance against the trees on the edge of a meadow, too far away for him to see her face. She moved easily and lightly through the long grasses, slipping between sun and shadow like a white thread stitching the trees to the meadow.

After that he asked about her and they told him her name. As he walked home that evening he thought again of the way she moved along the margin of the wood and felt his curiosity aroused. The night was warm around him, a cloak of heavy summer scent. He thought of her as he walked.

If she knew of his arrival she did not think of it. The woods were her summer and her escape. Each day with quick fingers she drew what she found in them, and in these little acts of salvage she gathered close to her the things she knew best. She did not expect to be noticed. Discovery is not a science; there is too much chance in it.