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# FROM A BALCONY

BY JAMES F. COURAGE

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The Major, whose surname was unfortunately Prattis, sat reading a book in the morning-room. He did not read as you and I read—as people read who turn the pages of a volume consecutively. No; the Major had, during the course of his career, spent many years in different places about the deserts of Africa, and had, in consequence, acquired an entirely individual manner of reading. Each page, having been perused, was torn from its fellows and cast like a white raft upon the ocean of the Major's blue Persian carpet. The Pomeranian, who slept this morning at the old soldier's feet, had been accustomed to these fluttering pages for close upon fifteen years, and quivered not a whisker as the beginning of Chapter Five of certain considerably tropic memoirs glided past her ears to the floor. She had heard many times—and who shall say had not understood?—the reason, given with martial precision, why the Major always read his books in this uncommon manner. He would explain very gravely—for he had a sense of humor—that when one travels in the desert every ounce carried is important; one must pay with the sweat of one's brow for each jot and tittle of superfluity.

'What more natural, then,' the Major would conclude in the persuasive voice of a born bachelor, 'what more natural than that I, fond of reading as I am, should contract this habit of ridding myself of weight as I go along?' And the listener's pain at imagining so many no doubt delightful books destroyed would be somewhat alleviated in contemplation of the Major's path across the desert, strewn, like the track of a monster paper-chase, with pages from Gibbon and thoughts from Marie Corelli.

A breeze from the Park (we are in Knightsbridge) blew in through the open French windows and played with the Major's white hair, of which not even twenty-five years' foreign service had robbed him. He was a handsome man, with a cast of feature quite English and with a taking blend of race and humor in his eyes and mouth. For some years now he had lived quietly in London, popular with many of a new generation, but happy by himself, enjoying his peculiar passion for reading, and devoting his affections to his small Pomeranian dog.

The little animal's name was Tommy, but *that* was a private joke of the Major's. 'For,' he would smile, 'who ever heard of a soldier's dog—even though a female—graced with a name belonging to a sex whose tactics are deplorable?' Thus did Tommy forfeit the immediate label of her sex; and it must be admitted that she occasionally carried out flank attacks upon visitors with an entirely masculine and British success.

But Tommy, in spite of her master's devotion, was aging rapidly. This morning as the breeze rustled the window curtains she glanced up, her head a little heavy, to meet the Major's eyes fixed upon her, it being fully five minutes since a page had descended to the carpet. 'Fifteen years,' sighed the Major, 'is a long life for a little dog.' He bent down and smoothed the well-brushed coat of Tommy with something more than a passing regret and affection. 'Bachelors we are, and bachelors we shall remain, by Allah!' he exclaimed. And the little dog, since she was a spinster and could appreciate, of course, all the niceties of the remark, wagged her short and fifteen-year-old tail in sly response.

Indeed, Tommy's age did worry the Major a great deal. 'One must have companionship,' he would mutter thoughtfully; and in his less hopeful moments, before the whiskey and soda took full effect, he considered the horrible prospect of his existence if Tommy should die. For Tommy, although she frisked about and committed the usual canine indiscretions during her daily walk with Major Prattis around the Serpentine, had had an increasing number of off moments lately, when she would lie down full of lassitude and heaviness, often allowing herself to be quite tented over

with pages from her master's latest book, and moving only very slightly indeed when he knocked out his pipe against the hearth.

That no other animal could possibly take Tommy's place was an axiom with the Major. How, for instance, could another dog be trained to inform him with the same compassionate tact when it was the hand of Miss Gannet and nobody else's that had just rung the front-door bell of the flat? A quiet scamper into the hall, a brief sniff beneath the portal, and finally a return to the Major and ever so slight a wink of the eye—that was all, but what other dog could do it so surely, so neatly? Not one! The Major drained his whiskey, and the round bottom of the tumbler, like a cipher, seemed to answer him. 'One must have companionship,' he muttered again. But Tommy was unique. Dogs might be legion, but there could be only one Tommy.

This particular morning the dog's age, almost like a shadow, fell heavily upon her master. He rose quietly from his chair and walked up and down the room once or twice before stepping out on to the tiny balcony through the French windows. From such an eminence, three stories high, the people on the nether pavement, seen from directly above, looked very much alike—no shoal of herrings spied from a boat more so. Yet what was it that suddenly caused Major Pratts to gaze downward with a quickened attention, as if he had noticed an animal native to another element—a bird, for instance—among those same herrings? The answer is simple: he had seen the top of Miss Gannet floating through the crowd toward the entrance to the flats of which his own apartments formed the third story.

It is time Miss Mildred Gannet was formally introduced. She is a lady of considerable charm, every atom of which she is capable of exerting with an appropriate skill. With what a tragic force, therefore, had it dawned upon her, not six months since, upon—oh, sardonic Time!—her thirty-eighth birthday, that the attractive youthfulness of her manner and character were being steadily undermined by the growing age and inflexibility of her person. Even the Major, not generally observant, had noticed her rise more slowly than usual from her chair one day, and had begun stealthily to compute her years. He was baulked by the strange lack of evidence in her features upon which to estimate. Her expression had always been delightfully childlike. Her hair had scarcely a single strand of gray, and her complexion, though small lines had sprung about her mouth and whimsical eyes, might well have been envied by women many years her junior. She was not tall, but had a very charming dignity.

Nevertheless, the problem of her growing stiffness had of late increasingly obsessed the agile mind of Miss Gannet, until one day while glancing through a paper of modern tendencies she had come across a certain discreet advertisement. She read it. She saw her course at once. Monkey glands would rejuvenate her! At the very thought she felt five years younger.

She made arrangements for the operation to take place secretly as soon as possible.

Winter had come and gone, to leave no happier woman than Miss Gannet. Her vocabulary had become enlarged to include 'gazelle,' 'lissom,' 'quiver,' and 'undulate.' 'I would never have believed,' she frequently told herself, 'that any part of an animal that climbs trees and dances to a street organ could work such a miracle in me. Save for a few remembered palpitations, I feel once more a *jeune fille*.' Which is as may be.

Now the Major's concern at catching sight of the vertical axis, so to speak, of Miss Gannet on this morning of which I speak needs a little explanation. Phrasing matters as delicately as possible, one may say that it had been the lady's intention for several years to marry the Major.

They had even discussed it openly between them. After a preliminary skirmish, Tommy's master (Tommy must not be forgotten) would break out, on the defensive, 'My dear Mildred, I am quite happy as a bachelor. My household has run itself for a number of years with no friction to speak of. My habits need little castigation. I admit I like companionship; I add that I prefer it dumb; I have Tommy. I am happy. You are charming. Do not let us mix our drinks.'

To which staccato broadside Mildred—who was, when all is said and done, a lonely woman—would reply at once: 'Your happiness, Lionel, seems to me only a stupid sort of isolation. Don't, oh please, become one of those pitiable walruses who waddle from club to club in pathetic boredom, in incipient dyspepsia. I admire you, I like you—'

But at this point the Major would rise in embarrassment and walk about the room whispering: 'No, Mildred, no. I

was born a bachelor. The motto beneath my crest is *Libertas et amicitia*. Let us stick to our guns. Have some more tea.' And he would bend down to fondle Tommy's head, believing securely that in the little dog's face, where no opinion was evident, all must be sympathy.

But let us keep to the events of a morning. Miss Gannet, with the vigor of one realizing a second youth, scorned the help of the elevator to lift her to the Major's flat, and climbed the flights of stairs with some show of enjoyment. Who it was that the valet was about to announce there was no need for Tommy to inform her master: he awaited the charge fully equipped, only picking up several pages from the floor and thrusting them into the grate to ensure at least a background of fire. Tommy mounted a chair slowly.

The door opened. 'Lionel, I was taking a morning walk. The weather is delightful. I thought I might just look in on you—Chloe upon Daphnis, shall we say? I am glad to find you at home.'

'Good morning, Mildred. Tommy and I have breakfasted late and are, as you see, still confined to barracks. Sit down. We are delighted to see you. Tommy, a lady wishes to sit on your chair. Away, sir.'

'Ah, poor little dog! But how slowly she gets down.'

'Mildred, I am worried about the animal—deeply worried. He is fifteen, not a day less, and I am afraid will not live much longer.'

'You expect the Last Post?' Miss Gannet was sly.

'I don't like to think of it,' whispered the Major. 'You know my devotion.'

This evident dismay would have touched a heart far less fond than Miss Gannet's; and indeed, though she admired Tommy only because she saw the dog's master wished her to, she felt this morning that to console the Major by all the means in her power would be an act of true charity. She wished, however, with Spartan tact, to avoid the sentimental, the diffuse.

How the wonderful idea came to her, who shall say? The Major was at first shy of her plan. His powers of judgment did not work well in the morning; and besides, he was not told of the one fact that would straightway have decided him. Mildred stayed to lunch; her gracious company and an excellent meal sharpened his decision.

'Nevertheless,' he demurred gravely, 'I should be truly sorry if the little dog suffers any pain. In fact, my dear Mildred, I should reduce you to the ranks for having suggested this business. But we will hope for the best. Have some more coffee.'

A week later the operation took place; Tommy was given fresh thyroid glands. From the first the experiment was a success. She took a new interest altogether in affairs, and even flirted in her small way with the surgeon who had performed this, the initial operation of its kind.

The Major was overwhelmed. He transformed Tommy's partition in the animal hospital into a bower of violets,—a flower of which she had always been particularly fond,—and every day brought her novel delicacies of fish and fowl. Miss Gannet sent some blue catmint and half a chicken, with a small card attached: 'To Cerberus from Beatrice.'

The experiment became known to the outside world. Newspaper men attempted to interview Major Pratts, but were ordered in military terms to depart, and were privately judged guilty of insubordination. The *Pomeranian Mail* published a supplement, with photographs of the Major's house and of the Serpentine.

A journalist found out that Miss Gannet had suggested the operation to the Major: the two were photographed together, and the old soldier's services to the nation were recalled. 'Pratts of Pretoria'—what memories of forgotten times! People began to hint at a future engagement. A well-known maker of wedding cakes sent up a card, and was

stonily and summarily ordered about his business elsewhere.

The Major was furious. He had never courted public distinction, and he abhorred the powers of public opinion. The prospect of his own will being in any way coerced by rags of newspapers had never occurred to him as possible or probable. That his devotion to Tommy should be used as it were against him, to show up him and Mildred Gannet in a species of high relief before the background of the little dog's operation and its consequent fame, seemed to him in the light of his own discomfiture the work of a malignant monster. He would have been sorely tempted to prosecute—regardless of the indirect charge—had he not feared additional publicity. And what a sorry finish to a military career—to be last noted by the eyes of the world as a figure in the law courts, defending his own integrity. No; anything but that. One must grin and bear it.

The day of Tommy's release arrived. Miss Gannet insisted on accompanying the Major in a taxi to bring the pet home—insisted over the telephone.

'We will go together—Cæsar and Cleopatra in a chariot.'

'I had rather you did n't come, my dear Mildred. You might excite him.'

'Nonsense, Lionel. I am as quiet as a dove.'

As they drove off with Tommy from the hospital the Major winced as he caught sight of the surgeon's face fixed into a smile of benediction upon the happy trio. Matters were becoming worse and worse! But, of course, it was Mildred's fault for having insisted on her presence this morning. Yet a further horror was in store for the unfortunate man at the hospital gates. The three of them were actually photographed as the taxi paused to turn into the street. A pressman with a large black camera secured them for posterity. The Major closed his eyes and dared not think. Had he been ten years younger he would have offered himself for further colonial service; but that was out of the question.

Tommy's renewed vitality was mercifully a redeeming joy. No sooner had they reached the flat than delighted barks and frenzied scamperings to and fro, such as the Major had not seen or heard in years, warmed his heart. Tommy had never displayed such energy and spirits before; all signs of her former lassitude and valetudinarianism seemed entirely submerged by waves of vigor.

'A miracle, Mildred. Tommy's vitality has even affected me. I trust there will be no relapse.'

Miss Gannet replied guardedly, though with warmth: 'Why should there be, Lionel? There is scarcely ever any reaction. But you must look after her. Perhaps a woman's care—'

'Stifling! Disastrous! I am perfectly capable.' The Major walked across the morning-room and opened the French windows that led on to the balcony. Throwing them back he breathed deeply, as if the very idea of any but himself tending Tommy constrained him.

Mildred smiled and prepared to take her leave.

The Major turned. 'I am uncharitable. Forgive me. The manners of the messroom. Won't you stay to lunch?'

No, Miss Gannet could not stay. Nevertheless the Major, strictly against his own rules, opened a bottle of champagne at his solitary meal and drank long to Tommy's health, to the damnation of the press, and lastly—with some hesitation, and warmed by his first two toasts—to Mildred Gannet. Afterward he sat in the morning-room, smoked a cigar, and in his usual individual manner began to read a book. Tilting and uncertain, the pages fluttered down to the carpet.

Tommy was irrepressible. The Major could not concentrate upon his reading, but looked up every other moment to watch the little dog scampering about the room and biting here at a tassel, there at a swaying curtain, as nimble as a puppy.

In the hour of triumph prepare for catastrophe. A downward fluttering page from the Major's hand, being caught

playfully by a sudden fresh breeze from the long windows, flashed down the room, and, returning as quickly on a counterblast from the open door, twirled in captivating circles on to the little balcony, where it paused for a moment, hovering. As might be expected, Tommy, with her new vivacity, could not forbear such a chase. Down the room whirled the page; down the room scampered Tommy. Toward the balcony she followed, in yelping pursuit, while the Major started to his feet in alarm. Too late! High over the balustrade sailed the page. Up leaped Tommy, paused in sudden realization of danger, scrambled, overbalanced, slipped. Three stories is a long and fatal fall for a little dog.

A month later, with something of military ceremony, Major Pratts and Miss Mildred Gannet were married at a quiet but eminently Christian church in Mayfair. How much it was his own sincere wish to marry, the Major will never now discuss, and indeed it is scarcely good form to ask it of him.

The press had given the unfortunate gentleman little rest. If the interest aroused by the late Tommy's operation and renewed life had seemed large, that stimulated by her death had been out of all proportion, and had cast a faint but very unpleasant shadow of absurdity over those concerned. The Major was nearly distracted both by his grief and by the 'insubordination' of the papers.

The loss of Tommy meant to him all that he had feared. He was lonely. 'One must have companionship,' he repeated to himself, while, to his own surprise, he came gradually to the conclusion—after all, a source of consolation to him when he had finally arrived at it—that he would be happier married. And Mildred Gannet was, as we know, very fond of him. The bridesmaids wore violets.

The newly wed pair have been living lately in a pleasant house in the country near Reading. Mildred has lost nothing of the vigor of her second youth. But not very long since, at a dinner party at which the Pratts were not present, one of the Major's friends was heard to ask innocently whether it was from a purely memorial motive that the old soldier had recently had several new balconies added to the upper rooms of his home.

[End of *From a Balcony*, by James F. Courage]