



Carnbeg Days

RONALD FRAME REPORTS ON LIFE ON PERTSHIRE'S FINEST IMAGINARY NEWSPAPER

Bruce Clunie, bon viveur and the antiques correspondent of *The Days*, describes how a battle royal was (just) avoided on Briggait:

A BLACK Daimler limousine drew up outside a shop so grand that the owner, one Stephen ffinch (sic), styled himself "Antiquaire" above the door. (How he looked down his aquiline nose at the word "trade".)

In 1933 he had the most bespoke antiques showroom in Perthshire.

Out of the long black car emerged that day a small figure dressed in pearl-grey silks, with a jewelled hat sprouting feathers.

He knew at once who it was.

Queen Mary herself.

An aide got to the door before him, and held it open.

"Your Majesty," ffinch welcomed her with a bow as in she swept, accompanied by a lady-in-waiting.

He knew what was coming.

And sure enough, she was up to her old tricks.

Her eyes narrowed while she scanned the room avidly. He was expecting them to alight on the Fabergé carriage clock, which had been photographed for a recent edition of *Perthshire Life*.

But she looked past it, to the Hester Bateman silver chocolate pot.

His own eyes fixed in a stare.

She did as she usually did, admiring, complimenting, asking questions. Falling silent, waiting. Telling him that she could think of just the spot for this objet, in this or that room of one of five palaces, where it could be shown to best effect.

Silence again. The ominous removal of the handbag from her arm. She stood holding it in her hands.

Twice before it had happened, before he adopted smaller case in duplicate for his surname's initial - the distinguished-looking "ff" - back when he had been working in Godalming and then Bournemouth.

He guessed that she had no recollection of him at all. Among so many sycophants over the years, why should she?

But she did, rather alarmingly, recognise the swan-necked silver pot.

"One is familiar with these armorial bearings. But there was no opportunity to acquire the objet then. A retailer's premises in Bournemouth, was it not?"

ffinch's heart was up in his throat suddenly. He bowed again, to conceal the flush of colour on his face.

Recollecting ...



Bruce Clunie
Illustration: Alice Wylie

He'd had instructions from Matthews to shut the shop pronto if he got wind of her coming, to switch off all the lights. Finch was in a half a mind to let her in, just to spite Matthews, following the bust-up with him. Giving Matthews his black eye had been no more than he deserved.

But when the long black car lumbered into view, Finch did lock the door and hastily dropped the blinds, overcome with terror at the prospect.

Later that same year, when Matthews wouldn't allow him a share of the business - after five years of doing most of the buying and having to stand in whenever Matthews was sozzled or off eyeing the "lollipops" (boys, not girls, whatever he made out) at Branksome Pier - Finch did what he thought was necessary.

"You're blackmailing me," Matthews shouted at him.

"How would your wife like to know what you get up to?"

Matthews kept putting off paying him, so Finch took

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matters into his own hands. He quit his job, taking the pick of the silverware with him for recompense.

The police put out descriptions - not of him, but of the "stolen" articles.

That was ten years ago. In the Highlands of Scotland he was almost at the other end of the country.

And now this. Not just any light-fingered old bat who'd moseyed into the shop, but the Queen of the Magpies herself.

"One remembers something," she was saying. "This little beauty..." She paused, with a fine actress's sense of timing. "...wasn't there some mystery or other...?"

The chocolatiere wasn't for sale, but he had never been able to resist putting it out on show. Sometimes he would claim, when browsers who were

asking to be put in their place airily enquired, that those were his family's coat of arms.

("That's a bloody joke, that is!" he could hear his late father scoffing, washing at the kitchen sink before setting out to another of his Red Proletariat Party meetings.)

ffinch had to think quickly. It meant, initially, playing into her hands.

"If Your Majesty is so taken..."

She turned her eyes to him, narrowing them again.

"...the honour you do me is so great, I couldn't possibly expect to seek payment..."

He spoke, articulating quite clearly, so that she would hear all the scathing irony his father might have wanted. It sizzled and corroded as he spoke.

The Queen might have been going to speak, but seemed not to trust her own voice. She merely nodded, and as he took the silver chocolate pot to wrap it she turned for the door, leaving her aide to bring the trophy.

"A royal warrant," ffinch heard himself calling after her, in an accent more like his old Goldaming one. The Queen paused in the doorway.

"... wouldn't go amiss."

The Queen, with her silky back to him, didn't move. Only the feathers in her hat trembled.

"If there was ever anything in particular which Your Majesty might ... might have in mind for her collection, but feels she is unable to..."

Having done what he'd done in Bournemouth had been good for his confidence. For the past ten years he had been brazenly cutting corners. But act posh, and the world will presume accordingly.

Even his rivals conceded that ffinch's was the nonpareil of showrooms in Perthshire. He was as far from the wrong end of the business as anyone could get.

Queen Mary said something to her lady-in-waiting, who slipped back into the shop.

"Her Majesty informs me that she will investigate..."

Which for ffinch boiled down to "it's a done deal".

From the back of the Daimler the Royal Consort in dove-grey momentarily glanced his way before starting to open her parcel. ffinch once more bowed very low as the limousine moved off.

Standing upright he thought he was going to pass out after the strain of the past minutes. He closed his eyes, took some deep breaths, opened his eyes again.

He looked up at the frontage. Centred above the nameboard with "Antiquaire" in copperplate beneath his name, a warranty would look just the ticket.