Vespers *in* Vienna

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by BRUCE MARSHALL

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Books by Bruce Marshall

FATHER MALACHY'S MIRACLE
THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND FATHER SMITH
YELLOW TAPERS FOR PARIS
VESPERS IN VIENNA

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The attention of readers, and especially of those who served contemporaneously with the author in Austria, is drawn to the fact that the events described in this novel, and the characters who perform them, are entirely imaginary. In order to make this quite clear, and to avoid giving offence to hard-working senior and junior officers whom the author has every reason both to like and to respect, the method of military government, as regards both the British Zone of Austria and the quadripartitely administered city of Vienna, has been left deliberately vague or confused. Such foibles and frailties as are exhibited by the persons who take part in this invention originated in the brain of the author, who, being imperfect himself, is only too able to manufacture imperfection.

London, 1947 BRUCE MARSHALL

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For

COLONEL DAVID LOGAN GRAY, C.B.E.; M.C.

in

affection and esteem

'Il y a peu de vrais chrétiens, je dis même pour la foi. Il y en a bien qui croient, mais par superstition; il y en a bien qui ne croient pas, mais par libertinage: peu sont entre deux.'

Pascal: *Pensées sur la Religion et sur la morale.*

'Confessons la vérité: qui trieroit de l'armée, mesme légitime, ceulx qui marchent par le seul zèle d'une affection religieuse, et encores ceulx qui regardent seulement la protection des loix de leur païs, ou service de prince, il n'en scauroit bastir une compagnie de gentsd'armes complette.'

Montaigne: *Essais.*

I

BRIGADIER CATLOCK had signalled for Colonel Nicobar to come up to Vienna at once and help him to rehabilitate Austria, and, deep in the panting heart of Rome, the colonel was having one last read through the papers in his in-tray just in case somebody from a higher level than the brigadier should have ordered him to go to Athens instead. On that morning in August, 1945, however, there were only the customary reams of routine, some of them slightly anachronous, owing to the channels through which they percolated being silted up by custom and fatigue.

'Transport, motor radiators of,' the colonel read without astonishment, 'anti-freeze measures will no longer be taken.' 'Campaigns will, as far as possible, be arranged to coincide with non-malarious seasons. . . . Only the female mosquito desires blood. Owing, however, to the impossibility of distinguishing between the male and the female mosquito, it will be necessary to destroy ALL mosquitoes.' The colonel, accustomed by thirty years' service to the scriptures of strategists and quartermasters, did not smile. Nor did he smile when he read in a news-

paper which parroted to perfection the imperfections of the home press: 'Atom Bomb, Greatest Ever, Used on Japs,' and, 'Sky Hotels Planned to Fly World Routes.' For, despite his calling, the colonel was reflective enough to wonder sometimes whether the 'four freedoms' could ever be secured by dynamite and whether progress was synonymous with propulsion.

No such uncertainties appeared to exist in the mind of Brigadier Catlock when, five minutes later, his voice came crackling through from Vienna, on a rickety line:

'Catlock here, Nicobar. Get my signal?'

'Yes, sir.'

'In that case, what are you doing in your office? You ought to have been on your way hours ago.'

'Your signal only came last night, sir, and I had all sorts of arrangements to make.'

'Full colonels oughtn't to have to make arrangements, Nicobar,' the brigadier's voice said, with a rasp of reprimand. 'That's what they've got gee two's for. What's the answer to that one, eh?'

'There is no answer to that one, sir,' the colonel said, knowing that there was no use arguing with brigadiers, especially when they were younger than you were. When he had been a company commander at Mons, Brigadier Catlock had still been at Marlborough, sucking sticky sweets and carving his initials on desks; and, when he had been a major

at the War Office, the brigadier had been a company commander in the Buffs, splitting his infinitives in one of Empire's most forlorn fortresses. That was what the brigadier found it so hard to forgive him; nothing failed like success.

'There isn't, is there?' The brigadier made his voice more pleasant, disposed towards generosity now that he had been put wrongly in the right. 'Well, I still don't see any reason why you shouldn't come by road provided you don't stop to swan in Venice.'

'You may count on me, sir,' the colonel said.

'I hope so, Nicobar,' the brigadier said. 'There's a hell of a flap on here about everything from gasworks to foreign exchange and everybody seems to be making a nonsense of everything as usual.'

The brigadier rang off, leaving the colonel in a very bad temper indeed.

'Where's Senior Subaltern Quail?' he shouted at the closed door.

Sergeant Moonlight came in and stood blinking at the colonel.

'Did you say anything, sir?' he asked.

'I didn't say; I shouted,' the colonel said. 'I asked where Senior Subaltern Quail was.'

'I expect she's downstairs aving a cup of tea, sir,' Sergeant Moonlight said.

'You do, do you?' the colonel snorted. 'Do you know this, Moonlight? I sometimes think that if it

hadn't been for the British soldier's inveterate habit of swilling his belly with tea in the middle of the morning and the afternoon, the War would have been won two years sooner. And the danger's not over and done with yet by any means. Some day you may have reason to realise the truth of my words, Moonlight, down a salt mine in Siberia.' The colonel's wrath sank as quickly as it had risen, because he didn't really like being rude to people, especially to his subordinates who couldn't answer back. 'Sorry for being stuffy, Moonlight,' he said, 'but if there's one thing I can't stand, it's slackness, because it's slackness that's going to lose us our civilisation.' He smiled at the sergeant, wondering what it must feel like to wonder what it must feel like to be an officer.

'Perhaps it's not slackness Miss Quail being out to ave a cup of tea, sir,' Sergeant Moonlight said. 'Perhaps it's just fate.'

'Perhaps you're right,' the colonel said. 'Perhaps it's just fate.'

They stood smiling at each other in silence, at ease in their unspoken loyalty to a semi-understood cause. In the twenties and thirties, when other men had been thinking about making money, the colonel and the sergeant had both been soldiers, thinking about being soldiers; and in the fifties, when other men were again thinking about being soldiers, the colonel and the sergeant would still

be soldiers, protecting the profit-making poltroons while they prepared the next catastrophe, from which the soldiers would again have to extricate them. Across their meditation the bells of Rome pealed out in the hot noonday, reminding men that Mary was for ever blesséd.

'Is Oliness the Pope singing *Abide With Me*, sir,' Sergeant Moonlight said.

'Sometimes I take rather a dim view of the Holy Father and sometimes I don't,' the colonel said.

'I was born a Methodist, but my father was an Evangelitical, but when I joined the army I gave up my religion,' Sergeant Moonlight said.

The door opened and Senior Subaltern Quail entered. She had long silky black hair which shone in a sheen in the sunlight. She wore an open khaki shirt, a short khaki skirt, and was smoking a cigarette in a green holder. When he had first met her, the colonel doubted whether she was quite a lady, because she neither swore nor drank too much; but the vehemence with which she was pursued by officers of the Brigade of Guards and the Twenty-First Lancers, as well as the authority with which she could express her political and philosophical misconceptions, had speedily reassured him.

'Niente sugar in the coffee this morning,' Senior Subaltern Quail said. 'Been flagged to the Eyties, I expect.'

'Where's Twingo?' the colonel asked. 'The brigadier's rung up already. We ought to have started hours ago.'

'I haven't a clue, but I expect he's saying good-bye to the marchesa,' Senior Subaltern Quail said, drawing in the little carmine smudge of her italicised lips. 'She can say what she likes about sticking up for democracy now, but I'll bet she was no end of a fascist when Mussolini was around.'

'The trouble with the Eyties is they've got no cultural education, ma'am,' Sergeant Moonlight said.

'The way they behave at times you'd think they owned the country,' Senior Subaltern Quail said.

'Are you ready to start, Audrey?' the colonel asked. He would much have preferred to call her 'Miss Quail,' because he was old-fashioned enough to believe that Christian names ought to be used by people only when there was intimacy between them; but in the Eighth Army everybody seemed to call one another 'Bob,' 'Bill,' and 'Mabel,' and it would have been priggish not to observe a convention which had been consecrated by military success. 'We'll bundle the kit in the fifteen hundredweight and drive round to the marchesa's and pick up Twingo,' he said.

Audrey nodded dully and redundantly pigmented her face, gazing moodily into a small silver moon of mirror. For Audrey was in love with Twingo,

whose real name was Major McPhimister, D.S.O., M.C.

Observing her distress, the colonel patted her kindly on the shoulder.

'I shouldn't let it get me down, if I were you,' he said.

Audrey gave him a brief smile of gratitude

The Colonel put his red hat on his red hair and marched away downstairs and Audrey and Sergeant Moonlight followed him. The colonel had lost his left arm on the Menin Road in the last war, but he carried his stick in his right hand with a grand swing to make up for it. On his way downstairs he remembered when he'd been in love for the first time at sixteen and how she had had long loose brown hair falling down her back and how he'd taken her to see Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew at the cinema and how he'd walked home with her through the dark in silence afterwards. At the door of her house she'd drawn off her silly pudgy little blue woollen glove and held out a shy hand. 'Good night, Mr. Nicobar,' she had said. 'Thank you so much for taking me out. I've enjoyed myself immensely.' 'Good night, Miss Dale,' he had said. He had never seen her since, and sometimes he thought that he must still be in love with her, because for him she still wore long brown stockings and a black beaver hat with the brim turned up.

When they got downstairs, they found that their

kit had already been loaded onto the fifteen hundredweight. The three orderlies who had been loading it sat on the steps in the sun with expressions of concentrated witlessness on their faces, and did not stand up as the colonel approached.

'Middens!' the colonel roared. 'Who's the senior private here? Upon my soul, I never saw such a lot of unmannerly louts in all my life.' For the colonel could swear with vehemence and originality when he was angry, spilling his oaths in a pretty pepper and disproving Talleyrand's definition of swearing as the means whereby the inarticulate gave themselves the impression of eloquence.

The soldiers sprang to attention and stood staring in front of them with terrified docility. Impressed by their attrition, the colonel remembered that these men had been through the battles of North Africa and Italy and that when they returned to England the civilians would show them little gratitude. In the third-class compartments of suburban trains and the cheap seats in provincial cinemas their heroisms would moulder into anonymous mediocrity. It had happened after the last war and it would happen again after this war. The smooth men, the safe men, the men that crucified Christ for a block of debentures, the men of majorities would ride again in limousines with their tinned women.

'You see, it's not me that I want you to salute,'

he explained, trying to put into words the thoughts which were riding across his soul. 'It's not because I'm a colonel; it's because I represent authority. And it's authority that makes the world go round, even a democratic world. Only it's got to be a *good* authority. And that's precisely what we try to have in England: a good authority. A *good* authority, so that we may govern wisely a *good* people.' The colonel floundered as he tried to explain the problems that had baffled Aristotle, Plato, and Saint Thomas of Aquin to six golliwog eyes frosted with fright. 'And if the people don't respect authority, authority, even good authority, can do nothing for them. You must try to get it into your heads that discipline's going to be as necessary for Britain in peace as in war. And then there's the question of giving a good example in an ex-enemy country.' From the perplexity on their faces, the colonel saw that it was no use continuing. Whatever he said to them, as soon as he had turned his back, they would start calling him a bastard. 'All right, then; don't let it happen again,' he concluded lamely.

Sergeant Moonlight jumped onto the back of the fifteen hundredweight to make sure that the Italians didn't steal the kit or unscrew a wheel when they stopped in a traffic block, and the colonel and Audrey got into the staff car. Audrey sat in front with the driver so that she could go on smoking without annoying the colonel. The three orderlies

stood to grim attention as they drove out of the courtyard.

Round the Piazza Esedra they drove, with the American soldiers watching the children paddle in the fountains, down the Via Nazionale, past grubby priests and barefooted Franciscans, past the crumbling glory of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, past the Forum and the Coliseum, up the Avventino and past Santa Sabina and San Anselmo, on and out to where the marchesa had her flat.

The marchesa was not on her balcony, but they could hear her through the window, squealing away at Twingo: 'Cattivo, cattivo maggiore, maggiore, che porco maggiore.'

'The fate that is worse than death and more pleasant than plum pudding,' Audrey said as she climbed the stairs with the colonel.

The marchesa herself opened the door. 'Colonello, colonello! You have arrived just in time!' she cried. 'The maggiore is a very knotty buoy, much more porco than Ciano, although I really had not much to do with him because I am always being very democratica since oh such a long time.'

The lusts of the flesh were one of the many subjects about which the colonel had never been able to make up his mind, disliking equally the condemnations of clergymen and the licence of lechers. He supposed that the answer was, as often, the *via media:* love without sex was as unthinkable as sex