PENGUIN BOOKS

The Unspeakable Skipton

Pamela Hansford Johnson

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1822

SILK HATS AND NO BREAKFAST

HONOR TRACY

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THE UNSPEAKABLE SKIPTON

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To

DAN WICKENDEN

Fellow-writer

Note

I have always wanted to write a study of an artist's paranoia. This is a state which is, of course, not true of all artists, and very rarely of the greatest: but it is true of a certain number. Anyone familiar with the life of Frederick Rolfe will detect some of my sources: but in Daniel Skipton I have tried to include a good deal more and make a living figure out of what I have learned and can imagine of this special sub-branch of the artistic life.

P.H.J.

Chapter 1

HE knew everything there was to know about Belgium. He even knew Flemish. He knew a small printer in the street behind the Fishmarket who, for next to nothing, had made a die for him with his letter-heading in small script:

Maison Bleue,
Quai de l'Aube.

Under this, when he had put the date in his own beautiful italic hand, he began to write.

My dear Willy,

Fellows of my kind are not two-a-penny. I say 'fellows' because it is among them, I suppose, that you class me. All writers who do not bring you in a stupefying profit, sufficient to house you in East Grinstead and to enable you to stuff smoked salmon, are 'fellows' to you. So I do not merely assume: so I know that it is. For if money talks, my dear Willy, so do your associates: Dickinson, for example, has a tongue like a tap with a withered washer, it never stops dripping. And it drips to some purpose when it repeats to others the things you say about them in your manifold clubs, because it spreads a useful awareness that treachery is your stock-in-trade. So I accept the word 'fellow': I am such, as Villon was: but like him am not (I repeat, since I have noticed your inability to take in anything that is said to you until it has been patiently repeated three or four times) two-a-penny.

At this point he stopped, for he saw that the sun had begun to set, and knowing that in a moment the quay would shine like a square opal in all the marvellous colours known to man and, better yet, with marvellous colours to which no man had yet fitted a name, he went to his attic window and looked out.

The water was dead still, the reflections of houses and trees dropped down in it without a ripple. As he watched, it slowly filled with light; at first with aquamarine, then with topaz, and then with thin, tremulous rose. The bells began to ring in their sweet mournfulness, each note rounded as an O. They were playing *Dixie*, an air so foreign to the tongue

of the carillon that it took on all the gnomic charm of a language still undeciphered, like Etruscan or Minoan. It was an evening in spring.

The house in which he lived was one of the last of the patrician houses. The basement was now almost below the water line, and access had been given to the storage rooms on the ground floor by a stone step greened over with weed. By craning out across the sill he could see the step-gables, like two staircases of russet brick joined together at the top, falling steeply away into the water. He could just see his own white face with its dark and Christian rim of beard. The noise of the traffic came to him faintly through the bells. This was a peaceful quay, little frequented by trippers or by tourist motor-boats, but the Lange Straat was not two hundred yards away over the wooden bridge and round the corner.

The tune had changed. Geert-gen tot Sint Jans, said the bells to him charmingly, Tot Sint Jans, Tot Sint Jans. He had words of his own for all the wordless tunes. And then the big bell tolling: Jan van Eyck, Jan van Eyck, Jan, Jan, Jan.

A miraculous evening. The sky broke like an egg into full sunset and the water caught fire. He held his breath: an angel could appear in full dress with insignia, he would not be surprised. It was a wretched thing that, on an evening like this, he had to turn away from such majestic sweetness to write to such a swine as Willy.

Still, these things had to be done. As he turned back into the room he noticed that he had ink on his forefinger. He poured a little water into the washbasin (not too much, since Lotte insisted that a jugful must last a whole day because of all those stairs) and scrubbed himself clean, carefully poking beneath the nails. He threw the water out of the window; it broke the reflection of the house, which rocked and crumbled as if it were really tumbling down, then slowly re-formed and hung steady. Good. Now he could get to work again. But as he sat down he saw that one of his socks had fallen from the line, and he had to get up to repeg it. He inspected it carefully. Not a bad job; like most

of these Flemish mares, Lotte could knit. She had made a fuss about the pattern at first, had laughed like an ape; they weren't socks, she said, they were gloves for a man whose fingers had been cut off at the knuckle bones. He had explained to her patiently that they were the only type to keep the feet in perfect health and cleanliness, that it was disgusting to have the naked toes rubbing together, the sweat rolling between into grey crumbs: but even though she now made the socks herself she always had to laugh when she saw them on the line, she just couldn't help it; they took her (she explained) like that.

He looked about him again. Something wasn't there. Still something he should have done but hadn't. Now then, what? Bed made, supper tray ready to receive whatever it pleased them to bring him, knife and fork crossed – a small symbol, but it must give pleasure to Him, if only pleasure of a minor order. Chamberpot out of sight, slippers side by side. So much for that. On the chair, his book, his pill bottles, all three, in order of height – no tumbler. That was it. No tumbler.

He found one in the cupboard, took from the table drawer a packet of raisins, poured a quarter of them into the glass and just covered them with water. Excellent. Seven o'clock now, twelve hours for soaking. He could go on with his letter.

Do not think that I am such a fool as to be unaware of your plans. You refuse to take up your option on my book, though my two previous works must have made for you very much more than the royalty pittance received by me would appear to represent. I, too, exiled though I am, have my informants; they tell me how I am regarded in England, to how many persons of superior intelligence I am prophet, preacher, and poet. No! I am wise to you. You will not publish my book: but in a year from now you will publish another, under the name of some puppet or frontman, in which all the guts of my book, all the gold, all the gleam, will have been garbled to make a popular success. You will be clever, Willy, you will watch your step, you will set your shyster lawyers to work; you may escape me. But I shall know; and you will not spend an hour waking or sleeping without feeling my hot breath (the hot breath of starvation) on the pig's bristles at the back of your repulsive neck.

He was not altogether pleased with this paragraph, feeling it lacked polish: but he went on.

I observe that you have the impertinence to offer me a small loan of money. I will, you calculate, be too proud to refuse it, for like most of the mean-minded it is only money which you associate with pride. But I shall not give you the satisfaction of a refusal. I am fifty years old today, on this feast of St Mark, the Beloved Evangelist with whose lion heart my own, even in this sickly frame, beats like a drum; and if you think that I am going to starve for your benefit, so that you may pirate my work after my death, you are a sillier man even than your pug-dog's eyes and slopping lips would indicate. I will take your money without a pang; my pride has nothing to do with you. I await your cheque, which should be made out to

Daniel Skipton,
Knight of the Most Noble Order of
SS. Cyril and Methodius,
Banque de Flandres, Bruges.

That was enough: no need for signature. Anyhow it was getting too dark to write without a light, and he was not going to switch it on yet awhile.

He addressed the envelope,

William Utterson (Publisher),
of Uttersons,
241 Audley Square,
London, W1, Angleterre.
For the eyes of Utterson alone.

Stamps; he had only one, and it was not enough. Still, it would do. Willy could pay the excess, the fat profits of his swindling firm could cope with that. It occurred to him to ask Madame la Botte if she had another, but he decided against it.

As he looked at the envelope in his hand another idea struck him, a bright one, extremely amusing. He scored through the first 'Utterson' and wrote 'Unutterable', scratching that out in its turn, though leaving it easily readable, and then printed the correct name in again above it. It looked, he thought, most striking. He could imagine the clerks laughing when the mail came in.

Chapter 2

THERE was no need for him to go furtively down the dark stairs, since he had paid Madame la Botte something towards her rent only that morning, and she had seemed grateful for the small relief. He went down from his attic, past the old mother and daughter on the third floor, the La Bottes on the second, and the prosperous dentist on the first. There was nothing except smell to indicate the various income levels through which he passed, since the whole staircase was shabby; but the third floor smelled of dust and biscuits, the second of stewing steak and cheese, and the first of ether and flowers. He went out at the side door into the little square, and over the bridge on to the Quai Vert.

He dropped his letter in the nearest posting box and then sat down on the parapet to roll a cigarette. The morning's breeze had tumbled the pear-blossoms into the canal; some were still floating down like confetti, some, like surf, had piled up along the wall. He heard the man with the megaphone shouting to his boat-load, the roar and chug coming nearer.

Jan van Eyck, the big bells called; gruut Jan, gruut Jan.

The sky was greening over above the roofs, peridot where the sun had been, apple above that, and then a strip of olive. The lights were beginning to sparkle up all over the quay, only to be doused again as the curtains were drawn, giving privacy to comfortable householders, Docteur Joos, Madame Poupin.

Yes, he thought, this was the place for him and none other: he would die here. He had come to live in Bruges for cheapness at the end of the 1920s: had muddled through and out of the war by means of ill-health and broadcasting in Flemish for the B.B.C., and had come back not for cheapness, since the country was bloated with money and everything was dear, but because he could not bear to live anywhere else. And, so long as Flabby Anne kept up her

payments, he could just about get along. He had the La Bottes (what a name!) in his pocket. He had his monthly reviewing of English books for a local paper. He could always earn a bit by painting a few more *bondieuseries*, and if the worst came to the worst, could start taking tourists around the sights again: or around just one of the sights, the special one. It might not, however, come to that. Flabby Anne had protested only for half a page this time, an improvement on protests covering three or four.

The canal smelt sweet, of rot and of the sea. He strolled along the Dyver, towards the Gruuthuse and into the paddock of Notre Dame, where the swans glimmered in the rustic dusk like washing left out all night; past the Cathedral, over the main road and into a side lane, narrow and high as a canyon, the rooftops clipping the sky into squares. There was a light in Wouvermans' rubbish shop: the old boy opened and shut up when it pleased him. Daniel felt in his pocket and touched the luxury of twenty francs. There might be something to buy. Perhaps he was to have the pleasure of buying.

Over the shop was a hanging board, announcing in gothic letters and something like the English language, 'Mine Olde Antiques of Flanders'. Wouvermans was inside, in the heat and smell of the oil lamp, squatting like an octopus on the kind of stuff an octopus might regard as treasure. As Daniel came in he raised his loose-cheeked, pear-shaped face and pushed his gold-rimmed glasses on to his brow.

'*Goeden avond, meneer!* A rare visitor these days. How goes it?'

'What have you got?'

'Got?'

'I want to buy something.'

Wouvermans exploded into false enthusiasm, clapping his hands. 'Ah, that means *meneer* has cash! He has a little windfall, splendid. Because I don't give credit, as he knows.'

'I have cash, you old squid, so shut up and be grateful for a customer. You can't have many. How do you keep going? What do you really do for a living? That's what I want to know.'

The old man grinned. 'But I do what you see me do. I am a shopkeeper.'

He watched as Daniel routed around, poking into grimy corners, lifting rags and peering underneath, picking up bits and pieces, sniffing at them, replacing them.

'I have a little treasure; I would show it to no one but you. Not that you can buy it: but you might have a rich friend. It is a picture.'

'I don't want a picture.'

'A little Wouters.'

'Rik? You can keep it.'

'Not Rik. Johannes. Lovely as a song. Very dirty.'

'So are you. Bosh.'

'You don't want to see it, *meneer?*'

'No. This is what I want.'

Daniel came up from a pile of old clothing, clotted like the web of some mythological spider in the corner by the window, with a white dress tie, surprisingly clean, torn a little where it passed round the back of the neck. 'How much?'

'You sell the Wouters for me, you get that free. On the house.'

'I get it now. How much?'

'Twenty francs.'

'Bosh,' Daniel said again. They haggled. After a very long time, he got it for six.

'So you are going to a ball,' said the old man, 'you are out again with the Quality. Ah well, that's where you should be.'

Daniel walked out of the shop. He came back again. 'All right, let's look at the picture.'

It was a wood panel, split right down. Under the grime was a half-length of a woman weighing or counting gold coins at a table.

'Faked by an ass,' said Daniel, 'the original's in England. Belongs to Lee of Fareham, or did when I last heard of it. Pick on someone your own size, Wouvermans, someone very small.'

'Ah, but perhaps his is the fake!'

'No, it isn't. This is trash. And don't say "Ah" to me.'

He was at the door and half out of it when the old man said, 'Mimi is starting up again. Thought you might like to know.'

'I do,' said Daniel, and in his lordliest manner tossed him a five-franc piece.

'Better than nothing,' said Wouvermans. 'I'll tell Mimi.'

Daniel went back to his attic, just in time for supper. He was always punctual, for it was planked down on his table whether he were in or not, and if he was not in it got cold. Even Lotte refused to climb those stairs more than once.

She reached over his shoulder with a plate of stewed steak and prunes. '*Als t'u blieft.*'

He squeezed her thick waist, not because he liked doing so, but because she needed the encouragement. She went into her usual jelly-dance of silent laughter, pushed at his head, flapped her apron up and down. He eyed her as he ate; she was the purest Fleming, the stuff of Teniers, a golden pig-girl, with her whole being concentrated about her healthy stomach.

He told her the food was good. 'Well,' she said, 'you give Mamma little bits, steady, and it will go on being good. She don't want much, she's not greedy, it's just the idea of the rent, see?'

'I'll try to give her an idea of it. Go on, buzz off.'

It was a beautiful evening; it had turned warmer. All the stars were out in their full brilliance, shining without a single tremor between the lot of them. He washed up his plate and put it outside in the passage, to carry down later. Then he washed himself with his repetitive care, took out a clean sheet of paper, a bottle of brown ink, and a fine brush. He sat down to work. Pinning the white tie over the paper with drawing pins, he painted little stars all over it, at quarter-inch intervals. That was better: now it didn't look like a dress tie, but the smartest thing in bow-ties for daytime wear. While it dried he washed himself again, shaved the bare parts of his cheeks, combed his hair back in its two thin sweeps, back from his temples and over his ears. He had to cut it himself, but with practice had learned to do so by

no means badly. Anyway, he wore it rather long, smoothed down to a straight-cut line across the nape of the neck. He put the tie on, and made a careful bow. Now that had been an inspiration: the effect was just a little, but not too, bizarre. It was the tie of a rich man who did not care a damn for anyone's taste but his own, an aesthete's tie, but not a poor aesthete's. An American might wear it, or an English homosexual: but neither of them poor. It was perhaps the tie of a picture-buyer, or a dealer in rare books. He changed his socks for the clean ones, carefully pushing each separate toe into each separate little socket. Now he was ready, with nine francs left in his pocket, brisk, debonair, ready for an evening out.

Chapter 3

THERE was a band concert in the Grand' Place, and the cafés were nearly full. The belfry leaned its octagonal crown, floodlit, against the sky: one looked up and turned giddy. The visiting musicians were just rising to the high point of *Maritana* when Daniel crossed the square: the rigged-up lights sparked on their brass and their braided caps. He found a free seat on the terrace of the café directly facing the Cloth Hall and ordered a coffee. He would have liked beer but had not enough money for it.

Daniel was not one to peer round and about him. He sat proudly aloof, his profile raised, his mouth sternly set. He could see who was behind him in the pocket mirror concealed in his cupped hands.

Just behind him was a party of four people, English, one woman and three men. The woman was short and meagre, perhaps at the beginning of her forties. She was dark-skinned, and the hair wrenched back from her box-like forehead into a bun had a surface fuzz which the violence used upon it had been unable to repress. Her eyes were prominent, her nose was small and hooked. She looked like some distraught bird chained by one claw to a perch. She was obviously the dominating member of the group, not just because of her difference, that is, she was a woman, but because there was domination in her personality.

On her left was a very tall, fattish man, a little younger, who wore, despite the warmth of the evening, a pale grey duffle coat. He had a round porcine head, not unlike that of the Stratford Bust, with hair of a dark and lubricated chestnut, bright, jocund eyes, and a button nose. He seemed to Daniel like a person of many pleasures, seeking to enjoy, seeking to bathe in his blisses, who might be bad-tempered when blisses failed to materialize. Next to him was a slender man, fairish, with sharp features, who could have been any age between thirty-eight and fifty. He was conspicuously well-dressed. Unlike his fat friend, he looked not made for