

PEONIES AND PONIES

HAROLD ACTON

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*To Michael and Anne Rosse,
whose laughter and whose sympathy
refilled my fountain-pen.*

Note

Since 1928, when the Chinese National Government moved to Nanking, *Pei-ching* (Northern Capital) has been called *Pei-p'ing* (Northern Peace), commonly spelt Peiping, and still referred to as such by the loyal, in spite of Japanese efforts to re-christen it *Pei-ching*—hence variations in the following pages.

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difficult effort of communication, like the nameless *Tao*, or "Way," of his favourite Chinese mystics. "Those who know do not speak ; those who speak do not know" . . . Sufficient to know and be profoundly grateful, to realize that he was as far as it was possible to be from post-war politics and the general jumpiness of Europe while comfortably within the orbit of its dubious civilization, imbibing serenity from the geometrical quietude of China's ancient capital. And everything about him still remained supernatural, brought grist for pantheistic reverie and wonder.

What were the feelings, so copiously aired, of a Mrs. Mascot, in comparison with his ? What right had she here ? She and her polypus type were profaning all his sanctuaries. Had he not seen her with a party of tourists, who had motored, actually hooting their horns, up to the very Temple of Heaven ! When he thought of the spiritual isolation of those walled precincts, the lapis-lazuli tiles above the cypresses, the marble circles of the altar where he had often stood alone in ecstasy, so close to earth yet in the very midst of heaven,—when he thought of all this and then, as with a nightmare jump, of the tartarized teeth, the viscous stream of Mrs. Mascot's still flowing saliva, while she sprinkled her vicinity with specks of chewed-up cheese, Philip Flower, a mild middle-aged Londoner with neat grey eyes and greying hair, sympathized whole-heartedly with the most ruthless and fanatical of Boxers. Neither blistering labour in a chain-gang, nor the most exquisite refinements of torture, seemed adequate penalty for so barbarous a basilisk.

Mrs. Mascot twitched, not because of any psychic inkling of the gruesome trend of Philip's reflections ; only a wanton breeze had brushed her sharp shoulder-blade.

It was Elvira MacGibbon's virtual At Home day. People dropped in continuously, a high if not very animated average of Peking's foreign community, and "anybody who was

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anybody " was encouraged to bring friends and acquaintances, especially if they were recent arrivals.

Everything in Elvira's garden, a characteristically Chinese arrangement of gnarled trees and pseudo-mountains of superimposed rockery, seemed saturated in sky-fluid to the point of being glazed and brittle. For it was also Spring.

This particular group was lounging in an open pavilion. The ideograph for longevity was cut in the marble floor, through which a trickle of water twisted its way from a small cascade at the back. Formerly a light goblet would be floated along this significant channel ; by the time it had run its course each guest was expected to improvise a poem. Those who failed were mulcted in wine. Philip Flower regretted he had not seen Peking in those palmy days. Now the pavilion was marred for him not only by the presence of Mrs. Mascot but also by the rattan rocking chairs of Western design and cocktail paraphernalia, his æsthetic objections to which did not deter him from swallowing the "Gloom-chaser" in his frosty glass and accepting another. So far he had been silent. When the cocktail-shaker tinkled out a tune from some Broadway musical comedy, he raised his voice and hands in gentle protest : " My word, Elvira, isn't that going too far ? Jazz, in the Pavilion of Longevity ! "

Captain Gulley guffawed. Poor old Flower, he must be getting soft in the head. People who went in for Chinese all got that way . . .

" I simply love it. Do play it again," whooped Mrs. Mascot viciously.

" I am sure your pet Manchus would dote on it," said Elvira. " What about those musical clocks in the Palace Museum ? Those were the latest gadgets once, you know."

" I'll bet Ch'ien Lung would have fallen for Elvira's cocktail-shaker," said Captain Gulley, who in his spare time, as a hobby, was tinkering at a book about that emperor's military

campaigns, and liked to remind people of the fact. When the atmosphere was a little bit different from one's own, one had to show a sort of passport now and then . . .

The Captain's innocent remark, reinforced by another "Gloom-chaser," reminded Mrs. Mascot that she had by no means said all she intended to say on the subject of Peking. But would she ever ?

"It affords one so much scope. And it helps us to discover our real selves," she now asserted, "talents we never suspected were tucked up inside us. You, Captain Gulley, illustrate my point : before you came to Peking you never dreamt of becoming a historian, did you ? Now you'll have your niche next to what's-his-name."

"And be buried in Westminster Abbey," chirped Philip.

"As for me," said Mrs. Mascot, disregarding the interruption, "I have so many new strings to my bow . . ."

More indeed than she cared, at the moment, to remember. The strings in Mrs. Mascot's bow were getting rather mixed. It was a hard life, for ever trying to foist things on people who did not want them, summoning all the powers of suggestion and auto-suggestion, tactfully persuading Mrs. X. that the entire colour-scheme of her Park Avenue drawing-room would be nil if she failed to invest in some rare specimen of Ming *cloisonné*, and Mrs. Y. that she had found the only jade pendant in the whole wide world for her individual bust. And between the coming and going of globe-trotters she was busy breeding Tibetan lion-dogs, supervising a beauty-salon, a lending-library, and an Olde Albion Tea Shoppe. Beside these activities, she was president of the Ladies' Inner Circle for the Appreciation of Hopei Crafts and Arts. Oh, it was a hard life, and she had only herself to blame if she often tottered on the brink of a nervous breakdown, but she faced it manfully, determined to convert everything, eventually, into terms of riotous fun.

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“But we’re not all like you. You’re a magician,” said Captain Gulley gallantly. “I often wonder what we lads of the foreign brigade would do without you. I honestly believe the whole social merry-go-round would come to a full stop.”

Mrs. Mascot tried to be coy, at Elvira’s expense, about the Captain’s tribute. Elvira stifled a yawn and looked up at the sky. The dust-storms were over. Layer on blue layer of luminous enamel, and more blue flooding the ether beyond, a flawless infinity of azure. But Spring in Peking, even more than that season elsewhere, brought with it an insidious and penetrating lethargy.

“I have to reserve my energy for sculpture,” she said, “*ars longer*, you know.”

Her hands were so small that it was not easy to visualize them hammering at some uncouth block. Nobody had ever seen her wrestling with her medium. Her theories were uncompromising. Any attempt at realism she despised. Consequently her work involved a lot of cerebration. To begin with there was a long flirtation with the substance; wood or stone was only selected after a frenzy of self-debate. An interval of dreaming followed. Elvira would lie on her back fanning the fugitive breeze of visual fancy; ideas would soon buzz helter-skelter through her brain. The gramophone helped her to sort them out. Stravinsky, de Falla and, more recently, certain records of Balinese gamelans, had played their part in focusing her projects and straightening her line of vision. Finally she shook off languor; the sculpture shaped itself in a sudden access of brawn.

“My husband pined for babies,” she said. “At all hours of the day and night he would ask me: ‘When are we going to have a little stranger?’ It was too pathetic. Slowly I had to break it to him that that kind of motherhood could never be part or parcel of my consciousness. My children

would be giants of stone and bronze, vast abstractions for the future to gaze upon. So he left me. It was a mercy for both of us. From the first minute of our honeymoon he was insanely jealous of my art . . .”

Cool to call it art, thought Mrs. Mascot ; if that was the issue no wonder her husband had left her. It couldn't take much time to produce her stuff. A trunk of wood was bequeathed a pair of breasts and one was told that Diana of the Ephesians had reappeared in Elvira MacGibbon's studio. Even those who pretended to know something about this modern sculpture were apt to mistake the rockery in Elvira's garden for her latest experiments.

There were times when Elvira herself, contemplating her garden, suffered from vague pangs of doubt and discouragement. Why sculpt, when nature could achieve such marvelous abstractions ? At present she was in one of her “supine periods” of inspiration, but her gramophone records had lost their efficacy. This afternoon she was waiting for some new stimulus. She wondered what would turn up next. If only she could hustle Time ! Everything in Peking seemed to borrow its pace from those camels, which sauntered and sneered and sat about on their necks.

Like Mrs. Mascot, Elvira enjoyed the unexpected. She almost lived for it. She said things that were calculated to bring out what clandestine effervescence there happened to be in people. She had left Paris determined “to penetrate another unexplored reality.” For ten years she had been experimenting with all sorts of 'isms, and from Dadaism to Surrealism they had left her exasperated and unsatisfied. The long-propheesied “new shivers running through the intellectual atmosphere” had failed to trot in her direction. Tired of waiting, she closed her studio and caught the Trans-Siberian express without saying good-bye to anybody. It was in spite of herself that she fell headlong into a popular

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tradition—among those who come to spend a fortnight in Peking yet linger on, often for the rest of their lives.

She could not explain how it had happened : within a few days of her arrival she found herself engrossed in revolutionizing the sanitary arrangements of an old Chinese mansion in the north-east quarter of the so-called Tartar city. With her utter contempt for symmetry and balance, such scruples as first assailed her for settling down in the most formal of rectangular courtyards were soon dissipated by the adjacent garden. At once she felt it had been laid out for her, an ideal background for her personality.

Attractive in a striking way, thought Captain Gulley, but all the same, a wee bit cracked. Why was she living by herself in a house of paper windows when there were quite decent European houses of solid masonry to be had in Peking for the asking ? These women gallivanting about on their own in the Far East, he suspected them of secret vices, unhealthy hankerings after new sensations. He would like to get to the bottom of it.

Captain Gulley had never tasted the spell of the East. "It's all very well to say Peking's such fun," he objected, "but can't we get the same sort of fun at home, and more of it ?"

"Treason, Captain ; you know jolly well we can't. Not for the prices we pay here," said Mrs. Mascot. "And at home there's none of the additional excitement of feeling you're in China. Sometimes when I'm snug in bed I hear the watchman go by with his rattle and I say to myself : I'm in China, the land of the Dragon. It's positively eerie ! Though I'm an Old Resident, I still manage to get a thrill out of it."

"But most people here don't want to feel they're in China ; they certainly don't behave as if they did," said Elvira. "Wealthy widows like Mrs. Rashbaum come all the way

from Buffalo to devote their entire time to bridge and cocktail parties. They seldom budge from the Legation Quarter."

"I see what you mean," said Captain Gulley, "the South of France is nearer home, and that's where they belong—among the casinos. It's not as if there were any gigolos about. I wonder what makes them do it?"

"You're far too modest, Captain," said Mrs. Mascot with a leer. "You're underrating your own fascination."

"Those widows are a pack of sadists," said Philip. "They turn up hoping for another Boxer rising. I'd like to stage one for them. It would clear the air a bit."

"Excuse me, Mr. Flower, but Mrs. Rashbaum is a particular friend of mine." (Friend and client were synonyms to Mrs. Mascot.)

"I wasn't referring to her. In her case it's just plain snobbery behind it, the satisfaction of bragging when she gets back to Buffalo: I always winter in Peking. It sounds so glamorous. One can imagine the faces of her poor relations."

Mrs. Mascot bit her lip. The odious little earwig: she would have to think out some crushing retort. Mrs. Mascot wanted nothing better than to feel that her life was glamorous, and it was her heart's vocation to induce others to feel that their lives were glamorous too. And what was Philip Flower but a shoddy sentimentalist, one of those all too apt to "go native."

"Speak for yourself," she hissed.

Captain Gulley proceeded to explain that he had to make the best of his job here: his heart was in Peebles. In the sublime segregation of the British Legation his notions concerning the Chinese in general were quite Gilbert and Sullivan: quaint chaps with a penchant for opium and a relish for rats and cats and puppy-pies. He still pictured them

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with pigtails. The same things that roused Philip Flower's wonder and awe made Captain Gulley chuckle. It was true that since he had been in Peking he had undergone a process of metabolism. Recently he had become aware of a yearning for a gentle companion. Only at the back of his mind though. The picture was vague : no special eyes or clear-cut features ; just an amalgam of youth and competence and healthy colour. He was now in the prime of life. No doubt the right sort would tootle along in time ; he didn't have to worry. In England there were droves of women only too eager to be hitched on to such a sound piece of military manhood.

Elvira MacGibbon impressed and interested him ; he had never known anyone remotely like her. He supposed it was because she came from that other world—the world of Art. He had been both flattered and abashed at their first meeting ; Elvira had said to him in her pensive, drawling voice, as if weighing the words in her larynx :

“ You give me a feeling of power : your eyes are very brave and innocent. I feel we should harmonize, we should be friends.”

No woman had spoken to him like that before. That had been at least six months ago. He had even gone so far as to tell her about his chest measurements. Nothing had come of these expansive bursts. He was always hoping to find himself alone with her ; but she was continuously besieged by others, most of whom he managed to tolerate without approving. And as he looked at her now, rather piqued, he was inwardly sizing her up : attractive, yes, but like most arty folks, a wee bit cracked.

Elvira, of course, had quite forgotten her disturbing utterance. Elvira was so spontaneous. Rapid coitions of sympathy were followed all too soon by indifference, if not oblivion. She was like a cigarette that required continually

to be lighted again. And Captain Gulley could not provide the necessary spark. Had she kept a diary and, turning back its leaves, noticed the phrase about a feeling of power as applied to the Captain, she would have smiled incredulously—the good old comfortable collie !

Mrs. Mascot, Philip Flower and Captain Gulley had turned up early on purpose. Mrs. Mascot, because she could not afford to miss potential customers ; Philip and the Captain because each had looked forward to a soothing *tête-à-tête*. For Philip it was a tonic to confide in Elvira periodically. But Mrs. Mascot spoiled everything. Each was beginning to feel frustrated.

Elvira herself was getting bored ; there were no new faces and the talk was becoming vapid. At this rate she would have to discontinue her At Homes. She decided it was time to make herself felt. So she began to tell them how she could become a starfish at will.

“ You should try it. It’s wonderful exercise. Soon you find yourself floating, floating round the room. All obstacles vanish. You melt among cool currents. You get in tune with the infinite. I’m a starfish every morning before breakfast. It makes all the difference in the world to my solar plexus. . . . ”

“ I should be afraid of peeping Toms,” said Mrs. Mascot.

“ After you have done it once or twice you’re afraid of nothing. You can begin as a palm-tree : you merely stand and concentrate on a root. Soon you feel the sap rippling in your veins and the tender leaves beginning to sprout. The starfish stage comes later. Eventually you’re so limber you have the choice of being a kangaroo, a skyscraper, a bubble, all sorts of lovely things ! I prefer to do it to the gramophone, but it can be done without. This morning Wang (the Number One boy) came in while I was floating round without a stitch. I told him to wind up the machine. ‘ O.K.,

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Missy,' said he, not the least bit dismayed, just as if I had all my clothes on. You see I felt fully robed—as a starfish, of course."

Captain Gulley could not prevent the blood from surging upwards. His neck was crimson. By Jove, he wouldn't have minded standing in Wang's shoes. . . .

"I'm sure if it was me I could never confront my Number One again. But there are boys and boys. Most of those in foreign service become pretty thick-skinned. Take my imperturbable Chang. . . ."

Philip Flower was wincing. When amahs, Number One boys, squeezes, mafoos, losses and gains of "face," constituted the topic of conversation, he took his cue for departure. It was another of Mrs. Mascot's depressing inevitabilities that she should steer any discussion towards the scullery and let it stay there. Moreover the invasion had begun in earnest; the Trumpers and the Aspergills were approaching. . . . Poor Elvira, he thought, still to depend so much on Western contacts. It betrayed the real weakness of her armour.

Evening was gathering fast as he shook hands and bade farewell. How much cleaner simply to bow, like the Chinese! After Mrs. Mascot had dropped a humid paw into his, he instinctively sought his handkerchief.

The rigid garden swayed in the green aquarium light. Rocks melted into mythical animals; headless torsos and posturing skeletons mingled with the foliage. An amber glow came filigreed from semi-translucent paper windows. Sometimes a pedlar passed in a neighbouring *hut'ung*, leaving the air in faint anguish with his remote, shrill, melancholy cries. Probably it was only bean-curd or dumplings that he was peddling. Yet the cries seemed fraught with fatalism.

Philip Flower remembered the cockney chirpiness of news-