

GUILT AND ABSOLUTION

His breathing grew fainter. As the nurse gently held his wrist on the other side of the hospital bed, Margret whispered almost inaudibly "Has he gone?" Nodding slowly, the nurse was well aware that, however genuinely felt, sympathy from a stranger at such a time could sound almost perfunctory. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Wright. He was a real gentleman", she ventured, adding after a pause "Would you like me to leave you for a few minutes?"

With the curtains drawn, Margret bent to kiss Paul's still warm cheek. Although she had long accepted that the cancer was terminal, the prospect of solitude sent an uncontrollable shiver through her whole being.

Sometimes a week can seem like a year. After the funeral the dread of being alone was swept away by a strangely irrational wish to be left with her thoughts and free from so many well-meaning but empty promises to be 'any help we can'.

She wondered if there was any truth in the notion that a man's whole life flashed before him during the time it takes him to drown. Her heart told her she could ease the anguish by revisiting the silver wedding celebrations in romantic Venice, the gold in the welcoming arms of their son Jack and his wife Caribbean cruise gifted them by their daughter Elsie. No. Her rebellious conscience forced her to focus on the one occasion in their long life together she would have rather consigned to oblivion.

Yet she was unable to regard what she had done with unreserved regret; Paul was a much-travelled publishing executive who was often away on business for several days. Elsie had recently left home to share a flat with a girl she worked with at the London headquarters of a well-known charity. Jack had already emigrated with his future wife.

Margret had resigned from her job as a research assistant with a public relations agency when Jack was born and Paul's steadily rising income made easy their mutually agreed decision for her not to resume work subsequently. They had first met at a bridge drive and continued to pursue their shared interest in the game. Their decision never to play as partners was only half-seriously taken on the grounds that arguments about the way a hand had been played might follow them from the card table into the bedroom. They never deviated from this self-imposed rule, much to the amusement of other members of the bridge club.

Paul had no objection to her wish to go back on her own to the scene of many enjoyable evenings now that he was almost always away on Wednesdays when the regular drives were held. Nobody doubted that these two were and always had been in love and inseparable. So, what had happened to wreck the foundations of such a supposedly secure marriage?

Her thoughts took her back to that cold evening in the late 1960s when she literally ran into Alec Harrison and sent him sprawling unceremoniously through the (fortunately) open front door of the bridge club. He was convulsed with laughter and her attempted apology died on her lips. This unconventional introduction could easily have led nowhere had fate not found them facing each other across the table as East and West.

She warmed to her new companion as the evening went on and he patently enjoyed her company as well as appreciating her skills at the card table. As he commented she was relaxed when, after two more sessions as her bridge partner, he invited her out for a meal. For the first time they exchanged information about their circumstances. Alec was about the same age as Paul but he had had a more chequered career culminating in recent promotion to middle management in the furniture industry.

She could not make up her mind whether his uneven career pattern was attribute to or responsible for his equally unstable record in his relationships with women. He had backed out of one engagement at the eleventh hour for obscure reasons and his later seven-year marriage to his with Ruth had, he said, ended in a far from amicable divorce a year ago. Either way this might have been a sign of character defect, but she could not equate this interpretation with her, admittedly brief, experience of him as a man. He was somebody it was very hard not to like.

The relationship between them changed dramatically in unexpected fashion. She learned that her elderly father was seriously ill in a nursing home and, despite her hurried dash to Scotland, she only had a brief re-union with him before he died. She missed one Wednesday bridge session and had no means of letting Alec know why in advance because she had not considered it to be necessary (or, in retrospect, wise) to ask for his address or telephone number.

The still grieving Margret never asked herself why she felt able, even anxious, to try and find consolation at the card table. After explaining to Alec, somehow or other she managed to play a few rubbers, albeit badly, before he suggested that they leave earlier and persuaded her to go home with him, until she felt less distressed.

She was in no state to argue and half an hour later found herself in a comfortable armchair with a glass of whisky in an unsteady hand while she poured out her heart to a patient Alec. His sympathetic response was genuine, and she felt grateful, but the pain was hard to bear and the tears unceasing. He pulled her gently from the chair towards him while she sobbed on his shoulder. Raising her face, she essayed a stumbling apology, but he put a finger to her lips saying "I understand. When my mother passed away, I was inconsolable". Then he kissed her eyes to dry the tears, but she lifted her face and almost desperately searched for his mouth. She could not have analysed her confused emotions however hard she might have tried and in her frenzied state during what inevitably followed she didn't try at all. It was sufficient to feel the release from her agony, a strange sense of peace and a kind of joy.

They sat in silence as he drove her home except when she indicated the route and parted without making any plans for the following week. As she closed the door behind her the significance of the evening's events began to impact on her troubled mind. Was she in love with Alec? No. How could she be when she still loved Paul and always would? So, what was it all about? She had become bored, even a little neglected. Alec had rescued her. From what? Loneliness? Self-pity? She didn't know. It should not have gone that far, but it had, and clocks were not made for turning back. Above all, did she feel guilty? Not yet perhaps. That was for another day. Would she tell Paul? She was only certain of one thing. She must go back to the club one more time, if only to close the books.

It was Wednesday again. She spent an inordinate time rummaging through her cosmetics drawer applying too much powder and lipstick in a vain attempt to conceal her fear of how she would cope. In the event he didn't show up and, for the first time, she felt angry with him rather than herself. She had been braved enough to put on a façade – and all for nothing. Not wanting to draw attention to her anguished state or to be roped into a game for which she demonstrably lacked concentration, she made a rather lame excuse to leave as soon as an opportunity arose.

Paul came home earlier than usual on Friday and when she heard his car, she made hasty repairs to her by now worry-lined face before she was ready to greet him. They kissed warmly but Paul stood back to study her expression, and she immediately sensed that he could detect a change in her manner. At first, he put her depressed mood down to the loss of her father to whom she had very close, and he chastised himself for his failure to get away from important business negotiations to attend the funeral. But it soon became apparent there was another skeleton in her cupboard.

They shared a meal attended by small talk but, as soon as the table had been cleared, she suddenly burst out, "Oh, hell, Paul!". Then, slumping down on the settee, she lowered her voice and, looking at her feet rather than at Paul's puzzled face, mumbled "There's something I - er - must tell you".

She spared him nothing while he stood arms akimbo as he usually did when he was trying to reach a decision of some importance. The words tumbled from her mouth like a mountain torrent. She was at pains to blame what had happened on herself rather than Alec. She tried to look him in the eye. "I'm sorrier than I can ever say, Paul," she sighed. "I have no excuses. I let my emotions rule my head. Oh, God! I wish I'd never gone back to the club." She was uncomfortably aware that this was a half-truth at best.

Paul's reaction astonished her. He didn't lose his temper, and his voice wasn't cold as he asked quietly, "Is it over?" She felt the first sign of hope that her marriage might not be wrecked by this one foolish act. "Yes, oh yes. It never really began," came her quick reply. "Do you still love me, Margaret?" she stooped up. "With all my heart, Paul. And I always will whatever you decide to do." He looked at her quizzically, smiled wanly and then uttered the words she would never forget. "Then we must put this experience behind us, mustn't we?" It was almost a throwaway line.

She desperately wanted to hurl herself into his arms, but an inner voice restrained her and, felling confident at last, she promised, her voice much stronger now, "I want to spend the rest of my life with you, deserving your love – and I will. Thank you, Paul. I love you so much, darling."

Reliving this moment, Margaret, now in her eighties, was able to re-examine her uncharacteristic behaviour and Paul's unselfish forgiveness. Their lovemaking took a little while to regain the former warmth and enthusiasm, but Paul earned his wife's everlasting respect and gratitude by never once delving into the past to use her infidelity against her, even on the few occasions when they fell out on a point of principle.

Two years after the curtains were drawn on what Margaret came to call her moment of madness, she received an unwelcome reminder of it. Enjoying a restaurant meal with Paul, she glanced across the room and momentarily froze as her eyes rested on the unmistakable features of the man who had briefly enthralled her. He was engaged in animated conversation with a middle-aged brunette and their fingers were entwined across the table. To her relief, he did not return her glance and soon after the couple departed. Paul appeared not to have noticed her agitation and that was the last time she saw Alec.

Margaret had exhausted her travels into the past, including the very happy decades she had shared with the only man she had ever really loved when the time arrived to attend the reading of his will. Apart from a few small bequests, she inherited his entire estate which would enable her to live out her remaining years in comfort. As she was about to leave, the solicitor handed her a large envelope which bore her name written in Paul's familiar hand with the usual flourishing P and W initials. The solicitor explained that Mr. Wright has entrusted him with the responsibility of passing this to her in confidence if she survived him.

She managed to suppress her curiosity until she was back in the comfort of the house that would always be her home. For some reason she could not later explain, she read the contents aloud with increasing amazement and a growing appreciating of her great fortune as Paul's wife and a painful realisation of the extent of her loss.

My darling Meg (this was his pet name for her).

If you read this letter, it will mean that you have succeeded in outliving me, because I left instructions to destroy it if I should prove to have the greater stamina.

For the first time since I declared the subject taboo I have to raise the spectre of your brief dalliance with a certain Mr. Alec Harrison – not I hasten to add with the intention of opening old wounds. On the contrary, I think it is high time for me to make a confession of my own.

You may have been surprised when I didn't rush to castigate you in a fit of righteous indignation. The reason is quite simple. Despite my inability to fathom what goes on in the minds of most women, I always found you as transparent as that naughty nightdress you wore on our wedding night! High among the many qualities that attracted me to you was your total honesty. You seemed incapable of telling even a white lie, so I was convinced that you were – as the saying goes – more sinned against than sinning. Moreover, I had to accept my share of the blame for being away so often when you needed me. And I have never feared that the episode would ever be repeated.

So, it was easy for me to forgive you, but I was not slow to appreciate that you could not forgive yourself. You went to extraordinary lengths to restore my faith in you that I desperately wanted to convince you the slate was clean. Paradoxically, I believed that, far from enabling you to let go of your sense of guilt, any words of mine would only increase it.

My forgiveness didn't extend to Mr. Harrison, however. I wanted to punish him in some indefinable way. I was patient and my opportunity came quite by chance. One day when we were dining in the Duchess Restaurant in town, I noticed you staring at a couple at another table. You seemed startled and I soon realised why. The man fitted Alec too well for it to be a coincidence. I didn't know whether you had recognised his female companion.

I kept them under observation circumspectly and the man was obviously keen to get away quickly. He must have spotted you and panicked.

This was my chance, but I didn't not know where he lived, so I consulted the electoral roll and was intrigued to discover that Ruth Harrison was registered at the same address. I was sure that was the name you mentioned as being the wife he claimed to have divorced. One morning I parked the car a few yards away from the house and waited. Eventually lover boy emerged and drove away towards the station. After a few minutes I strolled over and rang the bell in the hope of finding Lady Ruth at home. My luck was in, she opened the door still in her dressing gown.

I can't remember what ploy I used to gain entrance and her confidence, but I must have been plausible. I told her the whole story with no holds barred, pleading that I thought it only fair she should know the truth. She became angry, especially when I revealed that he claimed that he'd divorced her. When she had calmed down a little, she explained that they decide to have a trial separation, but (apparently after you abandoned him) he asked her to come back because he missed her so much and she had agreed.

Her anger turned to bitter resentment, and I tried to console her. She was still in her dressing gown, remember, and I felt certain she wanted revenge as much as I did. She banged her hands against my chest, and I had to grab hold of her. Do I have to spell it out? I often wondered what happened when he came home and I told myself – not with much conviction – that I had avenged you as well as myself.

Why am I telling you this after so long? You may well ask. You see, my love, I wanted to absolve you from the burden of guilt that you couldn't shake off. Well, unlike you, I was a coward because I thought you would find it hard to forgive me when my behaviour was far worse than yours.

I am writing this letter the morning after my wonderful sixtieth birthday party so it may be very late to ask you to try to forgive yourself – and me too if you can.

All my love,
Paul.

Margret pressed the letter to her lips and smiled.

The End