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BULLETIN DE LIAISON N°6

JANVIER 2006

TRAPPED IN VENICE

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Traduction Henry Krasnopolski

At the risk of surprising or chocking you, I must tell you straightaway that in spite of an era of sordid realism, violence and delinquency, I have always been happy, of a pastel happiness, tender and harmonious, worthy of novels for well-behaved young ladies.

Do not believe I am stupid or deliciously dreaming:.. My felicity is lucid, real and totally justified by my life.

As a child, I was already joyful. The only daughter of a Swiss banker and a vibrant pianist, I took advantage of my father's solid intelligence as well as my mother's ethereal sensibility.

I was a calm adolescent and obtained a bachelor's degree just before meeting my future husband graduate of a British university.

Engaged in Vienna, we spent our honeymoon in Capri and settled in Lausanne where I gave birth to two children who grew to our entire satisfaction.

To day, my son is professor at an American university and my daughter just got married with an inspired violinist.

I told you: happiness.

The evening of my daughter's weeding, I must confess that I had a brief moment of nostalgia considering that my role as a mother was finished and that I was to have no other goals in life. But before I even had a chance to tell my husband that I was bored, he gave me the advice to travel.

The following day, at breakfast time, he slid under my napkin, a round-trip ticket for Venice along with a reservation at Hotel Danieli.

That is why, to day, feeding the pigeons in the Piazza San Marco, I can repeat that I am perfectly happy.

To add to my happiness, a man has been following me for more than an hour.

At the beginning, I thought that the flowers decorating my hat amused him, or that he was waiting the propitious time to snatch my handbag. Not at all. Since he began walking behind me, presumably believing himself to be hidden by the throng, he could have robbed me several times or got tired of my hat. I therefore deduced that I was his source of interest. Lucky, is it not?

Do not misunderstand me; I am a faithful wife. But the approach of this man was so unexpected that I could not prevent myself smiling, dreaming, feeling younger and remembering when I was sixteen!

The man was tall, slim with graying hair. Probably ten years older than me so I slowed down my pace to prevent his running out of breath.

Alas, my suitor must have been very shy for, in spite of my indulgent complicity, he did not try to accost me. The following morning, leaving the Danieli, I recognized the silhouette of my unknown man who was on a discreet lookout. I was a little bit surprised for, if he took notice and followed me the previous day guided by a sudden impulse, he could not have known my hotel address since he stopped tailing me on the Campo San Bartolomeo. Besides, a bashful lover would have declared himself sooner instead of following me silently as he is still doing to day.

In short, my deduction is that he cannot be a romantic tourist or an amorous gondolier...and I laughed in mockery of myself. This man can only be a professional, probably hired by my husband to watch me. My dear husband who loves me like at the beginning and to the point of forgetting my age, believes that all men are ready to show the same indulgence. And how can he be jealous after thirty years together? Is that not unhelped-for ?

As I do not want my husband to be deceived because I am strolling alone in Venice, and as I cannot imagine myself to go for a stranger's throat, even that of an Italian, I decided to stop the game and to approach bravely my follower:

- Sir, would you please offer me a cigarette ? You have been following me since yesterday so you have probably noticed that I have thrown my empty pack and...

- He looked at me, surprised and mumbling: following you ? Not at all, I was going home.

-Well, do not try to deny a fact. I do not blame you. And solely for the pleasure to lie, I added: besides, I am used to be followed.

He admitted his defeat and offered me his pack of cigarettes, adding with a smile: I have noticed that you do not smoke.

To seal our nascent friendship, he proposed to come with me to the Ponte Di Sospiro (Bridge of Sighs). As a matter of fact, I still do not know why he has been following me, but I must say that he is a charming person.

Wandering from bridges to alleyways, I learned that he is French, a widower of height years. His name is Armand Belgence and he lives in Fleurville (Normandy) with his daughter Marie-Clarisse who is about to get married.

Very softly, my companion touched my hand and suggested:

- If you accept to come and visit the palazzo a friend has lent me, you will understand why I was following you .

I am not certain that it is reasonable to go alone to a stranger's home but I resist better to mundane

conventions than my curiosity. In addition, Mr. Belgence is so courteous a man that I accepted his proposal.

He opened a wrought-iron gate. We climbed an enormous stone stairway and I looked ecstatically at the onyx statues lined against the pink marble walls.

- You are in the palazzo Altieri. This hall was built in the eighteen century by the Duke of Mantua who sealed into the wall these strong cooper rings to which he attached his wife: the poor lady was rumored to have been unfaithful and the duke, to avenge his honor, held her prisoner here until her death. He took a revolver out of his pocket and added: I hope that you are not afraid of these surroundings for you are going to be forced to stay here a few days.

Too bad. I was on the point of thanking him for the opportunity to discover this superb and barbarous residence.

I asked why he was after me in particular, but he softly protested:

-I have nothing against you. On the contrary, you helped me. I had to drag you here without causing any scandal and you made my mission easier by approaching me and agreeing to follow me here. Do not be afraid. I do not want to hurt you. I mean only to retain you for few days until your husband pays a ransom.

A ransom? Just like in a kidnapping? My gut says that it must be that.

Off the top of my head, I tried to appeal to his sense of shame.

- What a vile way. I thought that either my husband had asked you to watch me or that you had fallen in love with me. Instead, I am in the middle of a sordid gangster story. And I am the hostage of terrorists.

Mr. Belgence looked embarrassed by my indignation.

-In reality, we are the actors in kidnapping plot. It is my future son-in-law who had this idea. And you will understand if I say that he is already married and that he will need a lot of money first to divorce his wife and then to establish my daughter in the dignified life that she deserves. He therefore suggested abducting you. As for me, I had no choice in light of the fact that he wants to marry my daughter.

He looked at me as if seeking my approval.

A pity that he still had his gun in his hand for otherwise, I would have found him moving.

-Okay, I prefer to be the hostage to a love story than to terrorists. And your future son-in-law is surely a nice man since he wants to ensure a comfortable life to his two spouses. By the way, how much does he demand?

Good Heaven, the ransom corresponds to about the quarter of our bank's entire capital!

I tried to convince Mr. Belgence that it was far too much

-I assure you that we can live very well with far less. Besides, my husband does not have such an amount available.

Mr. Belgence smiled.

-Come on! That's exactly the amount that he can withdraw alone without need of your signature.

He may be right. I think I remember that, before dying, Daddy had provided that my husband would manage our fortune without need to bother me, and that he could dispose of a quarter of the capital.

However, for a greater amount, my signature was necessary.

How do you know all these details?

- Although an amateur, my son-in-law made some inquiries.

But these details are family arrangements known only by few: the chief accountant, my lawyer, my husband, and my children. All are beyond suspicion.

The kidnapping son-in-law is therefore somebody close to my family and I think that during the next months, I will have to observe carefully the men who initiate a divorce and to try to know if the future spouse has the sweet first name Marie-Clarisse... This is very easy.

Too easy even if Armand Belgence told me the truth.

I asked him: I suppose that the information you gave me to put me at ease, is incorrect: your name and first name, the details about your life at Fleurville...etc...

He seemed outraged by my question. Not at all. I am not a liar. This did not help to put me at rest for if he had neglected to be cautious with me, it could be either because of his sincerity or because he knew that I will be dead when I leave this palazzo.

Mr. Belgence understood that I was afraid and to console me, he offered me, chocolates, alcohols, cigarettes which I accepted except the cigarettes which seemed like to the last pleasure of the condemned to death penalty.

Eight days later, Armand and I were living together in perfect harmony. Everyday, he went out and bought Swiss or French magazines so that I can stay up to date with the daily life. I cut out the articles relating to my disappearance and glued them in a pretty book that Armand gave me. I was also busy

with three crosswords a day , more and more difficult mainly when they are without black squares. I let my jailer court me. I was in fact on the verge of becoming the unquestionable crossword champion... and Armand 's mistress.

Suddenly, all the entire course of events changed. Armand who went out to phone his daughter, came back in a panic and told me that his future son-in-law, not accustomed to the anguish of kidnapping, had had a heart attack and was now between life and death. Armand, caught off-guard, did not know what to do with me. Should he kill me or let me go ? I allowed myself to suggest the second solution. I swore not to denounce him or bring charges against him, and to be ready to make up a story justifying my disappearance, such as an escapade to Venice, my passion for the lagoon, the gondoliers and tutti quanti...

Armand, who liked me, made up his mind and let me go. Being born under a happy star, I was hardly surprised for I expected a happy ending of this nature.

It is inexorable, I was born to be happy.

Before leaving the palazzo Altieri, I asked Armand to let me have his address so that I can write him when I have time.

He looked surprised but offered me his calling card. In turn, I leaved him with a kiss.

And without checking out of the Hotel Danieli, I took the first train for Switzerland, impatient to be home in Lausanne.

But there, I was surprised to find my daughter on the steps. She looked stupefied to see me alive and appeared less than joyful. With a sob that could be either pleasure or distress, she told me that my

abduction caused my husband such despair that he was ready to pay the ransom which, in fact, he had already withdrawn in anticipation of paying it. But the day before yesterday he suffered a heart attack.

- I exclaimed: He too! Why aren't you at his bedside ?

My daughter explained that her best friend from boarding school, passing through Lausanne, had taken over for her at the hospital.

-Mother, you know Marie-Clarisse....

A heart attack, Marie-Clarisse...all these coincidences made me dizzy and to be sure, I asked:

- Marie-Clarisse Belgence ?

Without thinking, my daughter laughed and said : Mother, this is the first time that you remember the name of one of my friends. How did you do that?

Without answering, I sat down and served myself a double whisky. I deserved it for I was starting to understand that my husband organized himself my kidnapping to seize a part of my fortune and get rid of me without the burden of a divorce proceeding.

For the sole purpose of starting a new life with a stupid girl, the age of our daughter!

At the hospital, the doctor reassured me that my husband will survive as long as I made sure that he gets his dose of cardiac drug digitalis in approximately one hour.

I was alone with him when Marie-Clarisse entered the room. I introduced myself and to avoid a painful situation, I thanked her for taking such good care of my husband.

She looked at me without a response, half alarmed, half terrified.

I took advantage of her fear by assuming that she felt sick to offer her a glass of water.

She took it...and drunk my husband's drug...

In a moment her heart rate will slow dangerously while my husband's, on the contrary, will go faster.

Deservedly, the ones who loved each other in a criminal way will die together, victims of their passionate impulses. No doubt that the doctor will diagnose a sinister error.

It is possible that I am going to have my first nervous breakdown. I will go to France to cure it and take

advantage of new surroundings. For instance, at Fleurville with my dear Armand Belgence where I will console him over the death of his daughter and teach him how to smile again.

It will probably be easy as I have a talent for happiness.