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Christine Skarbek

A Most Unassuming Man

FROM OXFORD, IT WAS ON TO SHAKESPEARE'S BIRTHPLACE. Stratford was just as grand for the kids as the university town we had just come from. Everyone was reveling in those gloriously fine days. I then left fifteen-year-old Rick in charge of the troops while I took the short train ride to Stroud.

Sir George met me on the platform. I would have never guessed he was Sir George Ivan Smith. Unassuming and radiating a genuine smile, he made me feel like a dear old friend.

We got in his tiny, dated Volvo and left the train station parking lot. "So, you've never been to this part of England?"

"No," I said. "The closest was Stratford when I was here as a student."

"It's quite the vale. You'll see."

The town seemed to cling precariously on the steep sides of the V-shaped valley. Every street was a challenge for his manual Volvo, as it climbed doggedly upwards.

Going around a hairpin turn, he shifted down on the gears. The compact objected and sputtered almost to the point of dying. The ex-journalist and diplomat coaxed it back to life.

"See that Georgian mansion on the other side?" Sir George asked, pointing to a gleaming white edifice set in a luxurious carpet of green across the valley. It must have been miles away as the crow flies. The lodge had to be immense to be visible from such a distance.

"That used to be mine, back when I worked at the UN. That's where our children grew up. My wife and I let it go years ago for a song. It just sold a few months ago for over two million pounds. Had we hung on to it, we would have been as rich as Croesus but there was no money to keep it up."

He said it without a trace of regret. I immediately admired this man but even more so, when he parked the car on a rakish angle of a slope in front of a mere cottage. Sir George brought me inside and settled me on a comfy, overstuffed sofa in a room not much bigger than my bathroom back home.

"Some tea?" he offered. "My wife's due to get up soon."

A stocky, gray-haired woman stuck her head in the door. "Time for me to leave, sir. Lady Mary is awake." She ducked back out.

"It's hard to get help these days," he confided in me, clearing his throat. "My wife has Alzheimer's and I cannot afford nursing care, how is it you Americans say, 24/7."

In essence his wife's full-time nurse, he went to prepare the tea and bring her out. It was plain to see he doted on this frail woman who had a child-like air and didn't seem to know where or who she was.

"This is Christine Skarbek, dear," he said as he gently escorted Lady

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Mary to a chair. "She's come to ask about Dag. Shall I pour out? Do you take yours with lemon and honey, or the British way?"

"Oh, definitely the British way," I grinned.

Once we were all settled with the hot beverage and cakes, he pointed out the window at a rickety shed at the back of his garden. I thought it was where he housed his garden tools or a rundown greenhouse where he grew orchids or the like. "That's where all my papers are," Sir George murmured.

I marveled silently, "His personal correspondence to world leaders, all his private memos to and from Hammarskjöld! In a dilapidated shack!"

"Hmm, someday, I will have some time to put them in order." He shifted in his chair to pull the blanket up that had fallen from his wife's lap and tucked it back in around her.

Sir George continued sanguinely, "My UN years were hectic but fulfilling. Not that we were able to stop either Vietnam or the Congo. Or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for that matter. But the fight to get people to the peace table was – is – a battle worth fighting. Communism, of course, was the problem everyone had to grapple with, then. There were and are no easy solutions. There never are. But that doesn't mean one should give up. That we failed doesn't matter. What matters is that we tried."

He sipped on his tea as I checked my tape recorder. "Yes, striving for peace is always harder than waging war," he mused out loud, over the rim of his cup. "Everyone's emotions have to find a calm place. It's more than just appealing to reason. You must accommodate everyone's ego and put it to them: 'is this blood-and-mayhem what you want your children to inherit?' What do you think about the developments in Central and Eastern Europe?"

The Australian's abrupt turn-on-a-dime startled me. "Ah, Sir George, excuse me, but you're not the journalist in the room this time around," I chided the world-class diplomat with a meek, nervous smile. "I thought I was to ask the questions. But, on the whole, the events there can be nothing but good. I mean, now that the Iron Curtain fell six years ago, surely much progress has been made but I've never been there. So, I'm really in no position to know."

"You should go, you know. It'd do you a world of good."

"I really wish I could but my children are young and chronically ill."

"I see. That's a pity."

I wasn't sure if he meant it was a shame that I had young, sick children or that I was unable to go or both.

"When it comes right down to it, shouldn't I be asking you that question?" I countered pleasantly.

"Well put! So, you should!" he agreed.

So, I got him to return to his reminiscences of his UN days and two hours later looked at the grandfather clock in the corner.

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"Your train leaves in forty-five minutes," the man remarked perceptively noting my glance. "What do you say if I ring a cab for you? Is that alright?"

"Yes, thank you. But, last question: what was it that got you to decide to go into the UN in the first place?"

He pulled himself up sharply. "Can I tell you something I have never told any other journalist before?"

My amazement at his question must have been written on my face.

"I would like to tell you because I sense I can," he continued.

"Certainly! Go right ahead!" I encouraged him.

"I brought my first wife, Madeleine," he began, "with me from Australia to London when I was seconded there to the BBC Overseas in '41. As you know, those were the days of the Blitz. Our baby, our third child, was nearly killed in the rubble one night. Those were hard days for everyone: so many dead or forever disfigured, so many children killed or orphaned. It broke her, and she and I had to part. The war cost me the first woman I loved. Oh, I know thousands upon thousands lost their beloveds. It's all so crushing. War not only kills lives; it kills love. I resolved then to try to put an end to any and all wars from that point on – if I could. That's why I joined the UN in '47."

"Can I use this in my article?"

"Let me think about it for a couple of weeks."

At that moment, Lady Mary stirred in her armchair, looking very distraught. "Who is that woman? What is going on, Alan?"

Sir George immediately got up and, kneeling beside her, took her hands in his. "It's alright, Mary. We are here in our sitting room in Stroud. Alan is not here. This is Christine Skarbek, I told you. She has come to ask me about Dag, remember? I told you..."

"Dag? Who's Dag?" she whimpered.

He inhaled deeply. "It's alright, Mary. Do you care for another cake? I have your favorite. Here it is." His voice was soft and gentle. Putting another pastry on her plate, he cupped his hand over his mouth and shook his head.

When the required two weeks passed, I called repeatedly but the phone went unanswered. Then I received a letter from Conor Cruise O'Brien. He was writing to let me know that Sir George had died of a stroke, and included the obituary the Irishman had written for the *Guardian* in honor of his longtime friend and colleague. George Ivan Smith never got his papers in order.

Apparently, I was the last person ever to interview this globetrotting journalist and diplomat, an understated, modest man. What I took away from the few hours we spent together was the man's humility and acceptance of his situation. He was an eternally hopeful man.