

## The Price of Silence

Henry slipped out of a side entrance of The Royal Courts of Justice, pulling his trilby forward so that the brim shaded his eyes. As a former barrister he knew the lay-out of the old Gothic building. Stepping into the Strand he glanced anxiously left towards the main entrance where the reporters were gathered at the foot of the steps like hounds straining at the leash.

He set off at a brisk pace towards Trafalgar Square, the leather soles of his polished shoes beating a regular rhythm on the pavement, allowing his mind to roam freely. Thank god he had known old Travers, the judge. Been at Harrow with him. Not that he was corrupt. Absolutely not. But, he could put himself in Henry's shoes and imagine the mayhem and damage to his career that the press could wreak. Pity the Press Complaints Commission was a "toothless poodle", as Ed Milliband aptly described it. Could have saved him a lot of money. Mathers, Mathers and Lovejoy did not come cheap, but they were effective and discreet. JF Kennedy and Lloyd George did not have to contend with all this nonsense and they were in quite another league.

He crossed the road and made for Platform Six just in time for the five o'clock train to Folkestone. He sat down in First Class, stretched his long legs, reached for his i-phone and texted:

***All well. Keep calm. Say nothing. MUL.***

He clicked the familiar number and the message winged its way to Maria. He then phoned home and got the answerphone.

"Hi, Laura. I'm on the five o'clock. See you soon. How about supper at the Gurkha restaurant? Love you lots."

He closed his eyes. He owed his wife of twenty five years so much. Three beautiful clever children. Total support for his parliamentary career at the expense of her academic position at Cambridge as a theoretical mathematician. True she had continued to supervise

PhD students and submit papers but she was a high-flier who had harnessed her star to his earthbound cart.

A talented cook and organiser, she held sparkling dinner parties for him, mixing unlikely people who enjoyed contentious discussions. A discreet woman who had slipped into the driving seat before the police arrived when he had spun off the A20 after a particularly boozy dinner party.

His phone beeped. He opened the photo attachment. His breathing quickened and he covered the screen instantly with his hand. Apologising to his neighbour, he slid out past him and down the corridor into the toilet. Screwing up his nose at the all too familiar stench, he uncovered the screen to gaze at the diaphanous chemise clinging to a perfect female form. No head, no message was necessary. The invitation was clear. He tore his eyes away and left the unpleasant cubicle. Just as he was reluctantly pressing the delete button to erase the evidence, a small child who was running down the aisle pursued by a red-faced mother barged into him and knocked his precious phone from his hand. Luckily it landed in the lap of a stout lady who smiled and handed it back to him.

He alighted at Folkestone West and unlocked his bike from the rack. If Boris Johnson could cycle so could he. It was all part of his keep-fit drive. He accelerated down Coolinge Lane, crossed Sandgate Road and headed past Spade House for the sea front. His Regency house was perched on the cliffs with superb views out towards the French coast that he never tired of.

Laura, in old jeans and a worn Pink Floyd sweatshirt, had her back to him, pruning the roses. As he spun her round, she offered him her cheek, smiling her welcome. Fridays were always special. Henry was back in his constituency and they had the weekend before them apart from a Saturday morning clinic.

Later they sat before empty dishes and sipped sauvignon blanc. Henry gazed across at his wife. In a pale blue cashmere sweater and clean jeans, thick chestnut hair, with its white threads, piled up on top of her head and a light touch of make-up on her fair skin, Laura was in good shape for her age. But she was not Maria, his lithe golden girl who laughed at his jokes, sexted him, and made him feel good in bed again.

“You were late back, darling. Busy day? I believe John Lincoln was making a statement to the House about the NHS reforms. The coalition is back-tracking, I gather.”

“That was inevitable. It was a step too far giving the reins of administration to the GP’s with very little warning or training. Put the hospital consultants’ noses out of joint too. Little by little and compromise all the way is the coalition motto.”

They chatted on about politics and gossiped about Henry’s fellow MP’s. The expenses scandal was not yet dead and buried since one MP had just been jailed for eighteen months. There but for the grace of god, was Henry’s opinion.

“We all milked the system within the rules and with a good accountant’s advice. Some unlucky beggars got it wrong and they’re paying for it. Should raise our salaries then we wouldn’t need the extras to make ends meet.”

Laura laughed.

“Come on, Henry. When did you ever have to make ends meet? One claimed for a London flat he never used but his daughter did. Another set his mistress up in a love nest at the Government’s expense. Deserved everything he got, cheating bastard.”

Henry glanced at her in alarm but she was smiling.

Later, they lay in bed, Henry half watching the ten o’clock news and half dozing, and Laura reading the Booker Prize winner.

“Another super injunction was granted in the High Court today. Later on Newsnight there will be a round table discussion on this extension of the privacy law, chaired by David Dimbleby, with the Justice Minister, a Q.C. who specialises in human rights, and the editor of the Guardian.”

The newsreader’s lilting Welsh accent penetrated Henry’s pleasant fantasy and he sat bolt upright before he could stop himself.

“Sounds like another football superstar is covering his ass. If he was any old Tom Dick or Harry he would have to face up to his wife,” murmured Laura without looking up.

“Oh, I don’t know. If he wasn’t famous he wouldn’t need an injunction. Nobody would care what he got up to.”

“His wife would,” said Laura, switching off her light.

The next day, Henry went running early, along the seafront past the Imperial Hotel to Hythe. It was sunny and the sea was calm after the blustery weather of the previous day. He felt at peace with the world. He had secured his position. There was no reason why he couldn’t continue discreet liaisons with his assistant when they had to go to Strasbourg or some remote conference where adjacent bedrooms were a possibility. It wouldn’t be the same but given that he had no intention of leaving Laura, it would have to do. He stopped by the Sailing Club and reached in his pocket to send a text reassuring Maria and thanking her for the titillating photo. Damn! He’d forgotten his phone.

Laura sat, in the beautiful silk dragon-patterned kimono Henry had brought her back from Shanghai, hair dishevelled, sipping her Earl Grey tea at the kitchen table and scanned the paper. The latest gagging order dominated the headlines and the editorial. There were the usual platitudes about freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the influence of the European Court of Human Rights, particularly Article Eight, on the sovereignty of the British courts, which had recently allowed immigrants, jailed for various offences, to evade deportation on the grounds that they had a right to family life in Britain. What caught Laura’s eye was the implication that this time it wasn’t a footballer but a public figure. No more could be said but speculation that it was an MP was rife. She made a note to quiz Henry about the possible identity of the sinner. He usually had his ear to the ground and picked up any scandal going.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a beep. She checked her phone but it was the wrong tone. The beep persisted and she traced it with difficulty to Henry’s i-phone which was nestling under a cushion on the sofa where he had sat the previous evening. The beep continued and, irritated, she hit a button to switch the phone off. An image of an all but naked woman flashed up on the screen. Laura stared horrified, wondering whether this was an unsolicited piece of pornography.

She paused, shaking and sick with apprehension. Memories of unexplained late night sittings, a sudden blossoming of interest in clothes which had amused her at the time, Henry's vanishing off the radar when he last went to Strasbourg, his uncharacteristic lack of interest in sex, suddenly came together. Now it all made sense like a grotesque jig-saw.

Privacy was an unwritten code between married couples but her instinct urged her to invade Henry's space to find out the truth. Accessing his missed and recent calls she found that an unfamiliar number occurred frequently. Her hand trembling, she checked his inbox and found it empty except for the photo. She glanced at the sender's number and it confirmed her suspicions. Reckless now, she pressed the call button. A young well-spoken voice answered.

"Henry, darling, I was hoping you would call. I'm longing to hear all about yesterday."

Laura pressed the red button and sat down heavily on the sofa. She recognised the voice that she had first heard at a House of Commons reception for young hopefuls. An image of wide green eyes framed by a curtain of silky black hair, flashed onto the screen of her memory. She wept silently. Her golden retriever, Juno, pressed a wet nose into her clenched fists and she patted the soft domed head. Then suddenly she sprang up, dashed her knuckles across her red eyes, and went into her study. Booting up her computer she accessed Google and punched in a web site. Minutes later she had completed the transaction.

"Thank god for online banking," she murmured as a considerable sum winged its way from their joint account.

Her mobile rang.

"Mum, it's Gemma."

Her daughter sounded anxious.

"Hallo, darling. How's the new job going?"

Gemma had just started working for a high-powered city law firm as a trainee solicitor.

“Fine. It’s a real challenge. Are you alright, mum? Your voice sounds funny.”

Laura paused. Her daughter was not easy to fool but she could only try.

“I’m fine. Just got a bit of a cold coming.”

“I don’t believe you.”

A pause which Laura was in no rush to fill.

“What I really wanted to ask, mum, was whether you have looked at Twitter this morning?”

Laura’s heart sank. She knew what was coming.

“No. Why?”

“Have you read about the latest super injunction?”

“Yes, of course. It’s splashed all over the papers and the BBC dealt with it in detail last night. What’s Twitter got to say?”

Laura was stalling for time. She didn’t want to be the one to tell Gemma her worst fears. Let Henry do his own dirty work. He could muck out his own stables.

“Mum, I’m sure it’s just malicious gossip. Just jealousy of his success. I’m amazed that someone risked the wrath of the courts by breaching the injunction. They’ll never get away with it.”

Gemma was very proud of her father. Laura played for time.

“Whose success? What gossip? You’re talking in riddles, darling.”

“You know, don’t you? That’s why you’ve been crying.”

Gemma herself was crying now. Laura wanted to hug her better.

“I don’t know, darling. I’ve just seen something this morning that’s made me suspicious.”

She shut her eyes and saw again the flawless white breasts. She looked down and saw her own less than perfect pair. Breast-feeding and age had seen to that.

She could still hear Gemma crying quietly.

“I’ll just log on. Are you at your computer?”

“Of course. But it may be nothing at all. You know, just idle speculation.”

But it wasn’t. It was all there. Chapter and verse. Strasbourg. Henry’s assistant. The tweeter must be a journalist with considerable connections or even a rival MP. The latter was unlikely given the consequences of breaching the injunction. He or she might even have hacked into Henry’s phone or e-mails.

Laura heard the front door click.

“Gemma, can I ring you back? I promise it’ll be later today. Don’t worry. I can look after myself. Love you lots, darling.”

Henry came in, red in the face with exertion.

“Laura, have you seen my phone?”

