

THE WIZARD AND HIS BOY

(In this extract from the novel, Tom, the boy who has been stranded in time, recalls the first time he met the girl he is in love with. He has become an assistant to a stage magician, The Wizard Jacobs, and is helping him out when he sees the girl for the first time.)

'It was in the gardens that I first saw her. Cremorne Pleasure Gardens. They were quite beautiful, laid out on the flat country by the river, away from the city, where the water was still clear. There were wide avenues, glorious beds of flowers, trees, statues on pedestals, and every Sunday if it were not raining, ladies and gentlemen promenading up and down in their finest attire. The Pavillion was only then being built, so he performed in the rotunda, a magnificent structure in the very centre of the gardens, with colonades and lacework, and a spire pointing up into the sky.

'For me, it was a wonderful time. Mr Coppin and Mr Brooke had come back from Sydney in the middle of winter and the Wizard had finished his season at the Olympic. He was engaged in building new equipment for his forthcoming tour of the provinces, which was to commence shortly. In the meantime, he was making appearances, on fine weekends, at Cremorne.

'It was there that I first worked with him. Sprightly had become ill and was unable to perform, so the Professor, seizing the opportunity, began to train me as an assistant. I came soon to understand the secret arts of conjuring, to see how his devices worked - the hidden traps and concealed loads, and all the other clever artistry of his calling - and especially, I was called upon to memorise the special system for his mind reading tricks. These, being portable magic and requiring no equipment, were particularly suited to open air performances.'

He was silent again. In the darkness, Meg strained to see him. His eyes were on the river still. She shivered and squeezed his hand.

'Go on.'

'That day, it was brilliant sunshine. No wind blew. The afternoon was warm, despite the season. Deck chairs had been placed in a semicircle around the rotunda, and at one thirty sharp the Professor commenced his presentation.

'He began by inviting a gentleman from the audience to partake with him in a drink. He led the man to a table absolutely bare of all contrivances. He waved his hands. Two glasses appeared. The gentleman looked puzzled, for there was no sign of anything to put in them. The Wizard however, pretending a lapse of concentration, snapped his fingers and two decanters appeared upon the table - also of clear glass - one containing red wine, the other nothing but water. The Wizard asked the man to choose one. The man laughed, winked at the onlookers and seized the vessel containing wine. At the same moment, the Wizard picked up that containing water and winked at the audience. The man poured his wine. Great astonishment and laughter. Upon touching the glass, it became water. The Wizard poured his, and behold, it turned into wine. The

gentleman, much put out, picked up the glass, sniffed it, examined it from all sides, blushed mightily and returned to his seat in dismay, to the laughter and applause of those looking on.

‘Having excited the curiosity of the spectators in this way, he proceeded to dazzle them with other marvels. I meanwhile sat at the rear of the crowd, watching all, laughing and applauding like the rest. I was in some agitation, knowing the time drew near for my secret debut.

“Ladies and Gentlemen," I heard him say, "you have witnessed many wonders this afternoon. They have confounded your senses - dismayed you, delighted you - but all have been mere nothings beside what I will next demonstrate. For this concerns the mind - that mysterious seat of thought and knowledge. I shall send thoughts through time and space. I shall communicate without words. No danger, I assure you, but you are about to witness the inexplicable. A volunteer, my friends, please - who will assist the Wizard Jacobs in his manipulations of the mind?"

‘There was a considerable stir, needless to say. He fixed his powerful dark eyes on this gentleman and that, but every one flinched from the gaze. He made his way down through the rows of chairs, but no one would volunteer, despite his persistent "You sir?...Or perhaps you?" Finally he said, "What - no one has the courage to engage his mind with the Wizard? What of a child? Do I have a volunteer amongst the younger members of the audience? Again there was no response. Mothers clutched their children to them. One boy put up his hand, but his father snatched it down again. By degrees, the Wizard had worked closer to me, and suddenly I heard his voice in my ear, "You, young man?"

“I, sir? I know nothing of magic."

“Then come, my boy, and learn. You do not object, ma'am?" he said to the lady beside me and, "Thank you so much. He will come to no harm." Presently, I was sitting in the rotunda on a low chair, blindfolded, with my back to the audience.

“And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, through the power of thought, I will send messages to this boy, messages he will receive as clearly as if by electric telegraph. Let us test... Madam..." I heard his voice continue (for I could see not a thing), "would you be so good as to loan me some object for the sake of this experiment...? I thank you... Are you ready, boy?" he called to me. "Please concentrate now. Give me your whole attention. Let the image form in your mind. Excellent - you have it now, don't you boy? What do you see?"

“Please sir," I replied. "I see a ring!"

‘Applause. I had broken out in a sweat. I was half terrified, but also greatly excited.

“But this is nothing," the Professor's voice went on. "Anyone could guess a ring. What sort of stone has it? Say, boy, what do you see?"

“A diamond, sir."

‘More applause.

“And the setting, boy? Speak up now.”

“Gold, sir.”

‘I could hear the gasps of astonishment.

“But of course you are thinking - sheer guesswork. Well, I wish to quell such doubts. I have here a slate and a chalk. Would you, sir, oblige me by drawing for us some little object. I think you'll agree, my friends, that no one could possibly guess what this gentleman is about to draw - *is* drawing, right now before our eyes.”

‘He tapped me gently on the shoulder.

“Are you ready, boy? Frankly, sir, you must be an artist. You have drawn the most superb picture. Really, it is glorious. Do you not agree, boy?”

“Yes sir. It is...a picture of a hat.”

‘Thunderous applause on all sides. And thus, the Wizard took me through a variety of puzzles, each more involved, until the audience was wild with admiration. At last, releasing me from my blindfold, he thrust a coin into my hand and led me back to my seat at the rear of the assembly. All faces were turned upon me and I knew my face was flushed with pleasure.

“Thank you Ma'am," he said, bowing graciously, "for the loan of your most talented boy," and before she could reply, he swept back to the rotunda to acknowledge the delight on all faces. It was the Professor's applause, but I knew I had acquitted myself with resounding success. I was extremely happy.’

The voice in the darkness had stopped. Meg leaned forward.

‘How did it work, Tom?’

There was a silence, as if he had not heard the question. Then, vaguely, as if his mind was on other things, he replied,

‘A code. For unknown items, I listened for the first letter of each sentence, and transposed twice in the alphabet. ‘Frankly’ yielded ‘H’, ‘You’ gave ‘A’ and ‘Really’ meant the last letter was ‘T’: HAT. With common items such as rings, we used a prearranged listing, each with its key word. ‘Say’ was the key word for diamond, and so on. Once you understood the system, it was easy.’

Again there was silence.

‘What’s the matter, Tom? Who did you see that day?’

He shivered. In the faint moonlight, she could see an agitation about his face. She waited. At last a distant whisper:

'It was Louisa.'

'Louisa?'

'She was standing off to one side, like everyone else, looking at the Wizard. I could not take my eyes from her.

'She was beautiful. She had dark hair, lustrous and full, eyes of the richest brown, a fine nose, lips red and soft, skin of the purest milk white. She stood wrapped in a crimson cloak, watching the Professor. Her dark eyes were totally serious. She did not laugh or frown, but looked on with an expression at once of grace and sadness.

'I watched her, completely overwhelmed by something I could not explain. All the noise vanished in a flash. She seemed to stand at the centre of another world in golden silence. And shortly, like two magnets set at a distance, whose fields of influence gradually come to act upon one another, so that one swings and points to the other - she turned and saw me. I felt something pass between us. If there can be galvanic currents within inanimate objects - as the Professor had shown me - then I felt at that moment a current of the most powerful kind drawing us together. She looked into my eyes and I into hers.

'The sound came back round me then. It was applause for the Wizard, as he bowed his way off the platform and swept up one of the paths out of sight. I was to follow him, but at an interval, when the crowd had dispersed. So I had some minutes to occupy. I sat, as the chairs around me emptied, and watched her.

'It was only then that I recognised she was with someone. He was a big man, though covered by a cloak - of gold, with stars and tiny suns all over it. He had jet black hair, plastered down on either side of his head, and enormous moustaches, curled up at the ends. His face was ruddy with health, and his large white teeth flashed out of a broad mouth. One hand clasped the collar of his cloak, and I saw that it was huge, a paw almost. He was looking at the rotunda, considering from a distance what I now saw to be appliances slung from the ceiling - in preparation for another act. I remembered that Mr Coppin had boasted of two performances at the pleasure gardens upon the one afternoon. It was rumoured that he was shortly to purchase the gardens himself, and was eager to see the clientele increase. As I watched, the big man in the cloak strode off towards the rotunda, casting a word sidelong at her to follow.

'I rushed to find the Professor. He was taking tea in the sun, and was obviously pleased to see me. His generous face broke into a warm smile as I advanced. He motioned me to sit, and waved for cakes.

'''Tom, you were splendid. In so short a time to memorise the details of the system! And not a single mistake, though I led you a merry chase. I am delighted, dear boy. Even when Sprightly is

well again, I shall keep you on as my secret accomplice in these performances. You are most gifted.'

'I glowed of course in the warmth of his praise. Since that painful day when I had seen his figure by the sea, I had known he was special to me. He was the father I had lost. He was no less kindly to me now than on that first rainy night. With every day, my affection for him grew.

'But now I had something else on my mind. I picked at my cake and looked around constantly.

“‘What is it? Tell me.'

“‘Sir, the next act after yours - in the rotunda - who is...who are they?'

“‘Ahah, you spotted them too. Coppin's latest find - in Sydney I think. The great Samson!'

'He had announced them with a theatrical flourish, but I noted that he frowned mysteriously. He was watching me closely.

“‘May I watch the performance, sir, before we go?'

“‘Why, there is no need, my boy.'

'I looked at him, not understanding. He chuckled at my confusion, and added,

“‘They will be on tour with us in two weeks from now. Coppin's enterprise knows no limits. He has been most kind in booking theatres around the colony. A double bill, no less - at Geelong, Ballarat, Castlemaine... I forget the other places now... You will have the matchless pleasure of watching this Samson and his assistant night after night.'"

'I pondered this new information. My heart swelled. I looked at him again.

“‘Are you sure you *really* want to see him? Very well then, off you go. Why might you not steal a first glance at our new travelling companions.'” He smiled and waved me away. But again I caught something sad in his eye as I turned to go.

'Thus it was that I saw them perform for the first time, seated once again in a back row by the rotunda - this time a real spectator. But what I saw filled me with dismay.

'Samson was a strong man and an acrobat. First he stood directly in front of the audience. His presentation began with juggling - first with balls, then Indian clubs, then fire sticks, which he tossed with gay abandon scarcely inches from his waxed moustache. He was very skilled, and drew much approval from the audience.

'That part of the program complete, he moved into the rotunda and leapt upon a horizontal bar which had been set up there. With the grace of an animal, he swung, flew, dipped and rose, again and again at dizzying speed, landed upon one hand - his muscles bulging - and dropped cat-like

to the floor, before bowing to the onlookers. Then, upon the Spanish rings - suspended from the roof - more acrobatics, this time still more daring, for at times he was darting through the air upside down. Any miscalculation would have seen him dashed against the hard tiled floor, but he never missed. More applause.

'Next, he came out again to the front and dared any number of gentlemen to test their strength against his. Immediately, a half dozen volunteered. A rope was led through a pulley, also fixed to the rotunda, and one end he grasped in his large hands. The men seized the other. Samson flexed his muscles and called on them to do their best. At this, they strained with all their will. He let them pull him forward a little, grinning knowingly. They laughed and flushed with pride. At once, he dug his feet in and winding the rope around his bulging arms, heaved it towards him. They skidded, they toppled, their laughter became groans, and to a man they tumbled to the ground, beaten, as the rope snaked from their hands. He roared, a vast, animal cry, and bowed to the audience's acknowledgement of his prowess.

'His final act was now due. In a pantomime show, with much winking and eye rolling, he called out for someone. Nothing happened. He pretended to be confused. The spectators watched eagerly as he slipped out of sight behind the rotunda. He returned almost immediately, followed by a girl in a magnificent crimson cloak. Every eye stared. It was the girl I had seen before.

'With much gallantry, he ushered her onto the rotunda. She bowed. Next, he fastened a golden harness around her, and springing up to the Spanish rings once more, inserting a piece in between his powerful teeth. And then he lifted her bodily off the ground and swung her giddily round - hanging only from his teeth! Great applause.

'Next he lifted her up to stand upon a small cushion he had placed upon his head. Once she was there, balancing gracefully, he dipped slowly - lifted two heavy weights placed on either side of the performance area, and raised them high into the air, while she remained poised, swaying slightly, above it all.

'Finally, he held his hand up in front of his face, and behold, she stepped onto it. His muscles seemed nearly ready to burst, and his eyes were starting out of his head, but bit by bit he extended his arm, with the girl still standing, miraculously, upon his hand. Tumultuous applause.

'At that, he tossed her in the air like a living doll, caught her, and gracefully lowered her to the ground. The audience clapped wildly.'

Tom was silent. It was completely dark. A moon had risen, a pale yellow orb, above the dark hills, and cast its thin radiance down on them. The creek, still rushing gently by, was black. Tom was shivering. Meg put her arms around him.

Clearly, the girl, whoever she was, meant a great deal to him. But why was he so disturbed to think of her? What was the undercurrent of cruelty in his description of Samson's act?

'Tom, what was her name?'

'Louisa.'

'Ah, thought Meg. Another missing piece.'

' Louisa Hart.'