

A Scottish Arts Club Short Story Competition Finalist

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STARDUST AND STILTON

BY MARGARET WOOD

Henry was scrabbling about on the floor when Mrs Harris opened the front door.

‘Mr. Butterworth,’ she cried. ‘Your poor old knees. What on earth are you doing down there on the cold linoleum? Here let me help you up.’

Henry struggled to his feet, ignoring her outstretched hand.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘I can manage perfectly well. I was just collecting the post.’

‘But you needn’t have. You know I always bring it through with your cup of tea.’

‘Indeed you do, dear lady, but I happened to be passing the front door as the postman pushed the letters through.’

‘Well, you just pop into the sitting-room and read them. I’ll bring your tea and toast in a jiffy.’

Just passing the front door, thought Henry. What a lie. At least that was one thing a life on the stage had given him - the ability to tell a whopper.

He settled into his armchair and sifted through the pile of envelopes. Several were printed in red and one was stamped ‘Final Demand’. It would have been too embarrassing for Mrs Harris to find out that her employer was almost on his uppers. He could just imagine the pity in her eyes. The thought of it made him shudder.

‘Is that you shivering, Mr B? ‘

Mrs Harris’s voice from the doorway made Henry jump. He stuffed the letters into his pocket.

‘It’s a bit parky in here,’ she said. ‘Shall I light the fire? You know what they say about old folk and hypothermia.’

Henry thought of the gas bill in his pocket.

'No. I'll be warm enough when I get breakfast inside me. Besides, I'm going out.'

'Going out? But you never go out.'

'Well I am today. I'm going for an audition.'

'You mean like actors do?'

'Exactly like actors do. I, Mrs Harris, am going to play Hamlet. Well, perhaps not the title role. I might be a bit long in the tooth for that.' He laughed and allowed a brief pause. Mrs Harris failed to pick up her cue. 'My agent warned me it wouldn't be the lead, but Polonius is a possibility.'

Mrs Harris was looking at him as though seeing him for the first time.

'D'you know, Mr Butterworth, I'd quite forgotten that you used to be an actor.'

Henry gazed around his sitting-room. The walls were covered in photographs which Mrs Harris dusted religiously every Friday morning. There he was with Larry. There with Joan. And Edith. And Dickie.

'I didn't *used* to be an actor, dear lady. I still am.'

'Well good for you, I say. Especially at your age. But you've never been on the telly, have you?'

Never been on the telly, thought Henry as he set off later that morning. It's enough to make you weep. Still, Mrs Harris was a good sort even if she did depress him banging on about his age. She'd even stayed late to sew a button on his shirt. He sniffed. Perhaps she'd been right about the mothballs. She'd have washed it, she said. If she'd known.

But he'd only found out himself that morning.

'It's Solly,' the voice had said.

'Solly who?' he'd asked.

'Ha- ha. Very funny, Henry. Your agent.'

'Agent?' I didn't know I still had one.'

'Mind it's not a lead part,' Solly said.

No matter, thought Henry. It was a part. Pity having to suffer the indignity of an audition, but he was ready for it. He'd gone over Polonius's speeches. It had to be Polonius. He was made for it.

Funny that it should be the Royal, he thought as he went in at the stage door. He'd had his first part here. Not a speaking one, but that had come soon enough. He breathed in the atmosphere - musty costumes and old perfume. Forty years... no...nearer fifty, and the place still smelled the same.

A voice, female and sharp as a blade, cut through the gloom.

'Yes?'

'I'm here for the audition.'

'Hamlet, is it?'

'Well, not the title role. Polonius, perhaps.'

'Polonius was cast Tuesday. Kevin Burnett, if you're interested.'

'Kevin Burnett?'

'Off Corrie.'

'Ah.'

'Still some odds and sods left though if you want to go through.'

He didn't. 'Fine,' he said and followed her pointing finger.

'Oy,' she called after him. 'What's your name?'

He paused, turned. 'Henry Butterworth.'

She came towards him. 'Butterworth? Didn't you used to...?'

He held his breath while she peered up at him.

'Nah. I'm thinking of Peter Barkworth. Go on then. And break a leg.'

She wasn't there when he came out. He was glad. She might have asked how he'd got on. He would have had to explain how the only speaking part left was that of 'messenger' and his voice was considered 'too plummy'. Still, they'd taken him on as an extra.

'It's good to have some oldies,' the infant director said. 'And you do have stage experience, don't you?'

It wasn't going to solve all his financial problems, but it would help, especially if he made a few economies. The wines and cheeses, for instance. Did he really need to buy them from Patterson's? They had some perfectly adequate stuff in the supermarkets. Patterson's had just become a habit; one he could well do without. He'd go there on his way home, but it would be for the last time.

Dusk was closing in as he reached the shop. He pushed open the door and stepped into the light. It wrapped around him like a comfort blanket. Like going on stage, he thought. Behind the counter, Patterson, plump as a butter-ball and rolled in an apron was deep in conversation with a customer. He looked up at the 'ping' of the bell. His round face split into a grin of welcome.

'Sir Henry,' he said, 'I was just thinking of you. I have this excellent stilton. Perhaps you'd like to sample it. This gentleman is singing its praises. Isn't that so, sir?'

'It's very good,' said the customer. 'Do try it ...eh... Sir Henry.'

'I will,' said Henry, selecting a piece. 'But it's just plain Henry. The 'Sir' is a little joke of Mr Patterson's.'

'Joke, nothing,' said Patterson. 'You should have had a 'K'. Your Julius Caesar was something else.' He addressed the other customer. 'I saw him at the Athenaeum when I was a kid. A school trip. I was dreading it. But it was magic. Really magic. And all down to this guy. If you can sell Shakespeare to a mucky little tyke from a council estate, then you deserve a knighthood I say.'

Henry's cheeks flamed with pleasurable embarrassment. He slipped the stilton into his mouth. It was rich and creamy.

'You're right as always,' he said. 'I'll take a chunk and a bottle of my usual.'

The warmth of the encounter remained with him even when he reached his house which was cloaked in darkness. Inside was chilly, but he hummed to himself as he bustled around switching on lamps. He hesitated over the gas fire, but lit it all the same. If this was

to be the last stilton, then he was going to enjoy it in comfort. Perhaps he might even explain to Patterson. 'Credit crunch' was quite fashionable, after all.

He uncorked the wine and placed the bottle on the hearth. Then he took a glass from a cupboard and set it on the small leather-topped table beside his chair along with the cheese wrapped in its waxy paper. Just a plate and knife needed to complete the scene. He went to the kitchen to fetch them.

The coldness of the room hit him and he wrinkled his nose against the smell of bleach. Stainless steel shone like an icy pond. Patches of bare wood emerged where paintwork had succumbed to vigorous scrubbing. Henry thought there were probably operating theatres less sterile. He picked up a note that was propped against an empty fruit bowl and read it.

Have thrown out mouldy apples. Also have taken liberty of looking out your winter long johns. Will wash and darn them next time. Yours to oblige. Rita Harris.

He tossed the note into the empty bin, equipped himself with plate and knife and returned to the sitting-room.

It was cosy already. The fire glowed. Light sparkled on the wine glass. He unwrapped the cheese. The salty pungency tickled his nostrils. He poured a generous measure of the wine and held it aloft in a toast.

'Sir Henry,' he murmured.

Then he settled into the wing chair which had supported him through a lengthy run of 'Pygmalion'. It was bathed now in the rose-tinted spotlight cast by the standard lamp. He picked up the telephone. It was answered immediately.

'Mrs Harris,' he said. 'It's Henry Butterworth. It's about our Friday arrangement. What with the credit crunch and everything, I'm afraid I have some bad news.'

1490 words

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