

Lawrence P. Spingarn

REGATTA

THE INVITATION from Henley was creased and the printing blurred; as the Major finished reading it for the hundredth time, the monocle dropped from his weak left eye. When he looked past the knick-knacks on the window-shelf into the cluttered garden where blowsy plants posed self-consciously, his ruddy face turned darker. The larger house across the brook was only a stone's throw away, but now it seemed very far. Yes, he'd leased Glazier's End in a fit of economy to a London couple who could better afford the heating bills. He'd also leased the Gate Lodge, and, with two rents giving him the illusion of freedom, made do with the inadequacies of Thrush Barn. Here the log fires hardly counteracted the dampness that seeped up from the stone floors. Here the Major and Mrs. Kendall-Wicks, bereft of help, could no longer entertain on any grand scale. The chimneys leaked rain and stored smoke. The single panel-ray frequently sputtered out. The taps and the kitchen stove needed to be replaced, but then, the *Balnorra* gleamed like a bird at the dock nearby and the invitation proved that the boat was not an extravagance after all.

"Maude!" the Major shouted, opening the French doors and striding into the garden, his shoulders lifting as he breathed in the summer air.

Maude When his wife struggled up the path with the sack of groceries, the Major noted disapprovingly her ill-fitting slacks and warm sweater. She'd remembered to prepare for their river trip, yet he did not smile as their eyes met. *Maude*: she'd never transcended the name, with its aura of the shabby lodginghouse in South Kensington where, indeed, her sister still worked as a maid, and when Maude spoke, the Cockney intonation was sharper than ever. He glanced uncomfortably away. He knew already what she thought of his purchasing the *Balnorra*. His mouth pursed defensively.

"Are we ready?" he asked in a conciliatory tone. "Very good. I'll feed Malcolm and Moira before we leave. I hope the chopped meat isn't frozen stiff."

"Oh, hardly. I set it out last night. The precious dears will have a proper feed today."

Maude's sarcasm wounded him. Once, in an outburst of feeling, she'd complained that the terriers ate too much for their size, but as the Major placed the dish before them, he forgot Maude's strictures. What lovely beasts! He'd bought the pair for next to nothing, for, though they came of a pedigreed bitch, the father was unknown. Ordinarily, he would have taken them on board, but today was not ordinary: he hurried to the dock in a cloud of elation. He was crouched in the cabin of the *Balnorra* when his daughter reported for duty. Heather-Rose had been born on his fiftieth birthday. The breeze whipped at her crinkly brown hair, at the tartan skirt in the colours of the Kendalls. Her brightness was a flag that confirmed the vigour he still enjoyed, and next year, at nineteen, she'd begin her teacher-training work. Smiling crookedly, the Major consulted his pocket-watch.

"We'd best be pushing off, my dear. As soon as Maude brings us the comestibles . . ."

"Father!" The girl's cry of reproach made him shudder. "Father. Why do you always call Mummy 'Maude'?"

"Habit, love", the Major answered flippantly as he tested the motor. "It's habit and means nothing. Besides, the name fits her perfectly. I wouldn't change it for the world."

"How odd, though. After all, she *is* my mother, and it's not usual to call her anything else—unless you don't recognize the fact. Hah! Maybe that's the trouble. I mean, take the boat, the dogs, the car—things that worry Mummy, that don't seem to worry you. She thinks you're daft for owning such a boat when you're on a pension. It's Mummy who has to scrape and save for the paint, the petrol, the upkeep. It just isn't fair!"

As the Major listened, his sense of guilt competed with his vanity. Heather-Rose, her face raised and her eyes flashing, had pushed between him and other distractions; he hung his head instead of defending *Balnorra*, the terriers, the "gentleman's carriage" he drove about the countryside. He wanted to touch the girl, to kiss her reassuringly, to still her throbbing voice. She'd never understand his need for *Balnorra*, for displaying his coat-of-arms, for delving into the history of the Kendalls. She was too young to understand. She was ready to pounce again, but fortunately Maude appeared on the dock in a flurry of lateness, and when the boat finally nosed into the Thames, Heather-Rose had spent her fire.

Gradually the day promised to be rewarding. The Major's watch and

the marine clock on the dashboard exactly corresponded. The sun was cutting through the mist, and at Bevelside when some hikers waved from the tow-path, Angus Kendall-Wicks waved blithely back. The pipe and his jaw assumed less rigid angles. He hardly felt his age this morning. He could still scramble about the deck like the proverbial puppy, for he had his health, and, thank heaven, the service pension stretched to include whisky, tobacco, and a growing library of books on navigation. But as he stood erect at the wheel, he chose to ignore his wife huddled dejectedly in the stern. Beneath the paisley scarf her face was shadowed.

"Look sharp ahead", he called over his shoulder. "We're coming to the first lock. Take the poles and ease us in. Up, up, up—see how fast the water rises! There. Steady on! Don't let us bump."

Maude ignored his commands. It was Heather-Rose who worked her pole against the muddy bank and ran to starboard to throw the rope around the post. Although tall and broad in the hips, she was lithe and clean-footed: the Major beamed at her proudly. The lock, he knew, would delay them twelve minutes. He opened his log-book, put on his spectacles, and noted conditions in his dogged Spencerian hand: *Temperature, 72°. Weather, calm. Longitude from Greenwich* Being so close to Greenwich made it hard to figure longitude correctly. He was still deep in the problem when Heather-Rose poked his arm.

"Let me spell you now, Father. Sit with Mummy awhile and chat."

"No, no, no!" he answered testily. "I'm fine. You can spell me at Enfield Lock. We'll break there for lunch."

So he gripped the wheel again and gazed stonily at his surroundings. On a nearby oak he identified the twite, a bird from the Northern moors displaced like him, but as the boat passed opulent cottages set on rich lawns, he began once more to calculate his finances. Maude caught cold easily. She was always complaining of the chill in the fabric of Thrush Grange, though at last, as much frightened as he by the prices of newer houses, she'd resigned herself to the drawbacks of their situation. It was not so bad, he'd argued. The taxes, at least, were insignificant because of his exemptions. No, it could be worse. As his low mood vanished with the last of the river mist, the Major was humming the tune of "Lady Murray's Reel".

Enfield lock was jammed with pleasure craft. While they waited their turn outside beneath an overhanging branch, Maude distributed sandwiches and cold tea. The greasy meat lay soggily between the white slices. The pickles were tame. The tea—even the tea—seemed terribly weak, and the

Major, chewing busily, worried lest his dentures slip. He heard the buzz of green flies, punctuated by Maude's cockney pleasantries exchanged with the lock-keeper. Eight minutes! Did Enfield lock require only eight minutes? The Major opened his book and scratched: *Food, abominable*, wincing at each sound that passed Maude's lips. She'd never learn to speak elegantly, but he, finding the lock open, trimmed his words to the expectations of possible auditors.

"We can proceed!" he sang out with military might. "Look sharp there and don't scrape our paint . . ."

His commands had their effect. The faces on the nearest cabin cruiser swivelled admiringly as the lock closed again. While it was scarcely in the yacht category, *Balnorra* had cost £1,600 second-hand. The defective pump, the temperamental engine, and the periodic overhauls kept Maude in a dither. Yes, she managed the budget, but he, rushing for the post-box at the Gate Lodge, was always first to claim his pension cheque. *Major A. Kendall-Wicks, R.E. (Ret'd)*, the envelope proclaimed to the sound of drum, fife, and bugle. The weekly *Clarion* from far-off Oban, together with his wide correspondence, gave him plenty to read. While he also subscribed to *Scottish Field*, his interest in sport had faded with the memory of house-parties and hunt-balls in his father's time at Scraw House. Now, he made do with late summer caravan trips to Skye, yet even these Maude begrudged for the passage over. But everything else cost too much as well, especially the trappings of the past.

As the lock emptied and *Balnorra* pushed onward, the Major stared critically into the mirror that showed Maude's ravaged face. He pondered a moment, then wrote: *stark with grim rectitude, mouth drooping, eyes embittered*—and chuckling perversely, capped his pen and placed his arm fondly about Heather-Rose standing at the wheel.

"Rough water", he reminded her. "Cut the engine, let the current take us along the next stretch. At least we'll save petrol."

Having to count pennies vexed him. He wore this blazer only for state occasions: the elbows threadbare, the Latin motto on the emblem patch almost illegible; and, the better to afford his favourite peat-flavoured Tullamore Dew, he had cut down on tobacco and beer. The country was being milked by taxes, yet the so-called improvements hardly showed. He'd thought of selling all, of moving back to Scotland, yet forty years of absence had weakened his allegiance. He could still speak Gaelic; Heather-Rose, her ears cocked, was prompt to answer, but one phrase she used could not be condoned and the argument began, a friendly though stubborn tug-of-war.

"But Father—it's not true. I've checked with MacMurdo's *Grammar*. If one means the boy was dark, one says *dubh*."

"Very well, *dubh*. After all, he is dark—the boy you mean."

He watched the slow blush that hid her freckles. The grocer's son who made occasional deliveries at Thrush Grange was not the kind of suitor he fancied for Heather-Rose, but then, she was eighteen; she was old enough to choose her companions. With the colour high in her face, she was most attractive. It was foolish, he realized, to chide her for a trifle. Dropping the subject and taking his turn at the wheel, the Major pursued a different tack.

"The Kendalls?" Heather-Rose faltered, changing to English.

"Yes, love. How are they related to us? The Muirfield Kendals left off the final 'l' in 1746, but they're closer than the Kendals of Orm. The Kendals of Orm, don't you see, threw in their lot with the Sassenach, so I doubt if they're even fifth cousins. No, I'm talking about us, the Kendalls of Wick, as the name was originally written, from whom we're descended. Truly descended!"

As he drove in the final point, Heather-Rose yawned tactlessly. Reading the marine clock, the Major saw that his watch had lost five minutes. Certainly his watch was due for cleaning; nevertheless, allowing for wind and current, *Balnorra* should reach Henley well before the regatta started. It passed one more stone bridge, the abandoned armoury, the old water-mill, the brickyard at Cursey. Happily, Cursey lock was free of traffic. While the Major bent to his log, however, Maude crept up behind him and peeped over his shoulder.

"At it again, Angus? Gaw! What do you find to scribble there? It's only a ten-mile trip . . . Angus?"

He shook his head stubbornly, as if at a fly, but Maude was no common insect. Twenty years ago the folly had begun with that quick proposal and quick acceptance. Even then, they were no longer young; resplendent in uniform, he'd sounded the trumpet of love in Maude's startled ear. Now he could only trill the notes of her social and intellectual deficiencies, but always, with her sharp inquisition, Maude put him on the defensive.

"Very important", said Major Kendall-Wicks (Retired). "The Inland Water Board *demand*s a record, yes, a record of every trip. Besides, if there's an accident, this log can be admitted in court as evidence, so you see . . ."

His was the wrong strategy. He knew this from the black look she gave him, from the rasping inhalation that cut into his sentence. The only

subject that consumed her was the immediate future, with Heather-Rose the eye of the storm she raised.

"Oh, and is *that* all that worries you, Angus? Your precious log, and the child still to be helped through school to a certificate, though who can tell at this rate if she'll ever get there, what with the fancies you'll spend for. Rubbish! I'm weary of scrimping while you knock about in this boat and feed your dogs fat and drive a car that's always breaking down. Where's your sense? If you felt for us, you'd sell this barge, put the money in five-percents, and stay home with me. No, none of your 'Maude darlings'! We'll have things settled for once, where you can't run out the door to your precious hobbies or silly friends!"

He'd heard enough. He thumped the log book shut, got up unsteadily, and rummaged on the shelf until he found what he wanted. But Maude followed him on deck in a tempest of annoyance, leaning over the side as he dropped the line and querulously repeating his name.

"Stand aside, Maude. I'm taking a sounding here. It's very important to take a sounding, don't you see, especially in the shallows where you can't be sure of the bottom."

To his great relief, she held her peace while he counted the fathoms: *one-eight, one-nine, one-ten*. He stopped at two-six, satisfied that the boat was safe, yet still frowning, for the bilge had risen more than he liked. He started the pump, which groaned and wheezed as he peered beneath the hatch. A new wave of irritation swept him. As he cursed the pump, he felt breathless and a bit dizzy; the heat came from the sun, and when he looked up, Maude had gone below with her knitting bag. Already he could distinguish the church tower at Henley. Taking the wheel, he asked Heather-Rose to show his colours. The flag soon beckoned to the town ahead. When *Balnorra* passed the stone bridge, he blew the whistle three times and then, drawing skilfully into the bank, helped Maude and Heather-Rose secure the moorings. The banners on the Army pavilion seemed to be there for him. He gave his arm to Maude and, with his yachting cap perched at a jaunty angle, followed the well-trodden path into the jungle of unfamiliar faces.

"I'm Kendall-Wicks", he informed the steward seated at the card-table outside the pavilion. "Reporting from Thrush Barn, Littlemore West. Here's my card, sir."

Instead of accepting the card, the steward peered near-sightedly at his ledger.

"Hmmm. It wouldn't be Herbert Kendall, Tupper Road, Manchester?"

"*Angus Kendall-Wicks*", the Major said heavily. "There couldn't be another with the same name, I'm sure."

"Ah, indeed. Just a moment, Captain. Somebody's written you in with pencil at the end of the list. If you'd let us know early on, we'd have typed your name proper. Let's see where you belong."

It was maddening to stand here exposed to delaying questions while Maude heard everything, and when the Major searched for Heather-Rose, he saw that she'd just passed into the pavilion: she was standing, indeed, on sacred ground. Her success quickly alerted the Major to another startling fact. Talking to a young chap in a plain blazer and a regimental tie, she casually accepted one of his cigarettes, smiled, and bent over the lighter. No, she'd never smoked before, at least in *his* sight. When Maude grinned, he bristled and shook free of her arm.

"Here we are!" the steward finally admitted. "Got you down for a place at the boom. Position 23. It's not a bad place, Captain."

"Look here", the Major protested, rattling the invitation significantly. "This invitation plainly states that I'm entitled to a view seat on the bank. And I intend to have it, sir! I didn't come all this distance for second best."

The steward, of course, was merely a glorified clerk with underbred features and a nasal whine; the sort you could count on for mistakes and excuses. He didn't even act respectfully, but Maude was tugging at the Major's sleeve.

"Dreadful sorry, Captain. The bank seats are reserved for active officers."

"Don't haggle, Angus", Maude whispered fiercely. "Come off the high horse and let's get our place."

A place at the boom? His cheeks flamed as the Major snatched the identification tag from the steward and turned away into the crowd, whose noise drowned the gentlemanly murmur of the service people on the reserved benches. For a moment, he wondered that nobody had yet recognized and hailed him. The warning gun ruffled his feathers again; surely, he couldn't wait longer for Heather-Rose. He eased Maude into the first punt he found, rowed to the boom, and made fast just as another gun went off. How many guns were there to be? The people in the next punt were blocking his view, but when he began to remonstrate, the Russian crew in scarlet jerseys raced past the small gap in front of him. He sat down, glowering at the water. As the loud-speaker beeped the results, he dropped his tag over the side and watched it float downstream. The sun had grown infernally hot; he was tempted to dip

his toes in the water, but sudden cheers roused him for the second race and Maude, squirming with patriotic fervour, asked if the Americans were gaining.

"How can I tell?" the Major snapped. "We're packed in here like tinned fish, damn it! The bankside has all the advantage, that's the truth."

He was thinking about Heather-Rose as the red-white-and-blue Americans flashed by. When intermission came, Oxford had been trounced and Cambridge trailed the upstart crews. Fagged by the heat, the Major let Maude steer for the bank. Suddenly he lost interest in scoring his programme; he felt a huge, soggy indifference to the day's outcome. Still, he hadn't counted on being sent to the boom. He deserved better of his five years in the Royal Engineers. It wasn't every man past forty when the war broke out who could have risen through the ranks to command a company. Major A. Kendall-Wicks—but as he bleakly gazed down the years at the shabby ghost of his self-respect, the title no longer echoed and swelled. Maude's voice knifed cruelly into these disturbing thoughts.

"A bit done in, are you, Angus? Well, I warned you before we started not to show off. We're not youngsters any more."

He answered with a grunt. As they sat beneath the refreshment shed over glasses of lager, he glimpsed Heather-Rose in the distance, walking with the chap who'd given her the cigarette, laughing at something he'd said. Of course, she was eighteen—eighteen and six months. He could not go on imposing his authority on her. Let her smoke, if she wished, or even sip gin-and-tonic, as her companion was doing. The flags hung listlessly in the quiet air. The heat continued to rise. Maude was smiling at him through her wrinkles.

"Done in", she repeated with smug complacency. "Then, why not go to the cabin and nap awhile? Nobody cares if you nap. You won't miss much. It's only fun and games."

Stung by her attitude and resentful of his weakness, the Major noticed that the intermission had ended. The oar worked awkwardly and the punt, usually so easy to manage, bucked against the current. For a moment, he was sure that someone had displaced him at the boom. He was prepared to explode in anger, but the slot was free after all, and while he was making fast, he caught from the loud-speaker the name of the Scottish crew. A desperate hope awoke in him. As he craned his neck to see beyond the mob of hatty women in the surrounding punts, he nearly lost his footing. And Maude had noticed his misstep; she noticed every false move he made. He reddened beneath her glance.

"Up *Torkill!*" he trumpeted through his hands, moved by the romance of the name alone. "Come on, lads! Pull harder! Put England down!"

Faces turned on the Major in pained amusement. He was hoarse from shouting, his cheeks were damp, his eyes bulged, and ever the anchor, Maude reached out a steadying arm. The sun and glare were too much. Nausea gripped him. The Australians shot ahead in their final sprint to victory. Yes, Scotland had failed again: a fat man laughed wickedly, a runted school boy pointed gleefully at him. As the Major slumped down against the seat, utterly spent, the Anthem hailed the close of the regatta. He was dimly aware of Maude guiding the punt to shore, where Heather-Rose and her escort awaited them.

"Father?" Heather-Rose asked. "Are you all right? I was just saying to Mr. Broughton here that we'd better hunt for you."

She was glowing. Her voice, formerly so toneless, vibrated with the added chord of satisfaction. Surely, the Major thought, she couldn't care less how the races had gone. When she introduced Mr. Broughton, her father was tempted to draw himself very erect and bow frostily, but suddenly the urge left him. He smiled at Mr. Broughton.

"There's no hurry", he assured Heather-Rose. "Take a walk along the river, if you like. It won't get dark for two hours. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll have tea on board. Nothing beats the cuppa Mummy makes."

Mummy: it had slipped forth unexpectedly, and Maude was staring as though he'd struck her. At tea in the cramped galley she still appeared stunned, but the Major wasn't quite finished. After he'd mentioned selling *Balnorra*, they both sat silent in the wake of the decision.

"I see", Maude began. "You just wanted one last fling before giving in. In other words, the whole bloomin' show—the flags, the whistles, all that bother. Well, gorry! I'm glad you're cured, Angus. Only I'm real come over. I never suspected you'd actually sell."

The Major nodded and lit his pipe, but as Maude rinsed the tea dishes, he uncapped his pen and opened the log book to the single blank page that remained. He was drowning among details. He could scarcely hold his fingers steady. Habit pushed the pen. He wrote: *Tea at 4:55. Lovely evening. No more storms in sight.*