

MR LOVEDAY'S LITTLE OUTING

By Evelyn Waugh

"You will not find your father greatly changed" remarked Lady Moping, as the car turned into the gates of the County Asylum.

"Will he be wearing a uniform?" asked Angela.

"No, dear, of course not. He is receiving the best attention."

It was Angela's first visit and it was being made at her own suggestion.

Ten years had passed since that day in late summer when Lord Moping had been taken away; the day of Lady Moping's annual garden party. It had been an abominable afternoon, culminating at about six o'clock with her father's attempted suicide.

Lord Moping habitually threatened suicide on the occasion of the garden party; that year he had been found black in the face, hanging by his braces in the orangery; some guests set him on his feet again, and before dinner a van had called for him.

Since then Lady Moping had paid seasonal calls at the asylum and returned home in time for tea, rather reticent of her experience.

Lord Moping was not of course an ordinary inmate. He lived in a separate wing of the asylum, especially devoted to the wealthier lunatics. These were given every consideration, which their foibles permitted. Including, on the anniversaries of their certification, being able to entertain any other inmates for whom they had an attachment to private dinner parties.

The fact remained, however, that it was far from being the most expensive kind of institution; the uncompromising address, COUNTY HOME FOR MENTAL DEFECTIVES, stamped across the notepaper suggested the lowest associations.

From time to time this was gently pointed out to Lady Moping, but she felt no inclination to relax her economical regime; her husband had betrayed her basely on the one day in the year when she looked for loyal support. He was far better off than he deserved.

A few lonely figures in great coats were shuffling and loping about the park.

"Those are the lower class lunatics" observed Lady Moping. "There is a very nice little flower garden for people like your father."

They drove past the blank yellow brick façade to the doctor's private entrance and were received by him in the 'visitors room', set aside for interviews of this kind.

"Lord Moping is quite ready to see you" said the doctor.

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“How is he?”

“Oh very well, very well indeed. He spends a lot of his time in writing.”

They heard a shuffling skipping sound approaching along the flagged passage. Outside the door a high peevish voice, which Angela recognized as her father's, said “I haven't the time I tell you. Let them come back later.”

A gentler tone, with a slight rural burr, replied “Now come along. It is a purely formal audience. You need stay no longer than you like.”

Then the door was pushed open and Lord Moping came into the room. He was attended by an elderly little man with a full head of white hair and an expression of great kindness.

“This is Mr Loveday who acts as Lord Moping's attendant.” said the doctor.

“Secretary” said Lord Moping.

He moved with a jogging gait and shook hands with his wife.

“This is Angela. You remember Angela, don't you?” his wife asked.

“No I can't say that I do. What does she want?”

“We just came to see you.”

“Well you have come at an exceedingly inconvenient time. I am very busy. Have you typed out that letter to the Pope yet, Loveday?”

“No, my lord. If you remember, you asked me to look up the figures about the Newfoundland fisheries first?”

“So I did. Well, it is fortunate, as I think the whole letter will have to be redrafted. A great deal of information has come to light since luncheon. A great deal.....You see, my dear, I am fully occupied.”

He turned his restless quizzical eyes upon Angela. “I suppose you have come about the Danube. It is a matter of secondary importance. There is the Elbe and the Amazon and the Tigris to be dealt with first, eh, Loveday?...Danube indeed. Nasty little river. I'd only call it a stream myself. Well, can't stop, nice of you to come.”

And with that he left the room.

“You see” said the doctor “he's in excellent condition.”

The door opened again and Loveday returned.

“Forgive my coming back, sir, but I was afraid that the young lady might be upset at his Lordship's not knowing her. You mustn't mind him, miss. Next time he'll be very pleased to see you. It's only today that he's put out on account of being behind with his work.”

“What a nice man” said Angela when Loveday had left the room.

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“It’s a great comfort to know that you are able to get such good warders” said Lady Moping.

“Oh but Loveday isn’t a warder” said the Doctor “He is an inmate. He has been here for thirty five years.”

“But I’ve never seen anyone saner” said Angela.

“He certainly has that air” said the doctor” and in the last twenty years we have treated him as such. He is the life and soul of the place. He has a way with the most troublesome of patients. An invaluable man about the place.”

“Yes, but why is he here?”

“Well, it is rather sad. When he was a very young man he killed somebody—a young woman quite unknown to him, whom he knocked off his bicycle and then throttled. He gave himself up immediately afterwards and has been here ever since.”

“But surely he is perfectly safe now. Why is he not let out?”

“Well I suppose if it was in anybody’s interest , he would be. He has no relatives except a step sister. Also he’s perfectly happy here and I can assure you we aren’t going to turn him out. He’s far too useful to us.”

“But it doesn’t seem fair” said Angela.

“Look at your father” said the doctor. “He’d be quite lost without Loveday to act as his secretary.”

“It doesn’t seem fair.”

Angela left the asylum oppressed by a sense of injustice.

“Mums, what does one have to do to get people out of the bin?”

“The Bin? Good gracious child, I hope that you do not anticipate your father’s return here?”

“No,no, Mr Loveday.”

“Angela, you seem to be totally bemused. I see it was a mistake to take you with me on our little visit yesterday.”

She did not reopen the subject with her mother, but a fortnight later, when there was a question of taking some pheasants over to her father for his eleventh certification party she offered to run over with them.

Angela drove her small car to the asylum and after delivering the game, asked for Mr Loveday.

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He was busy at the time making a crown for one of his companions who expected hourly to be appointed Emperor of Brazil, but he left his work and enjoyed several minutes conversation with her.

After a time Angela remarked "Don't you ever want to get away?"

Mr Loveday looked at her with his gentle, blue grey eyes "I've got very well used to the life here, miss."

"But don't you ever think of being free again?"

"Oh yes, miss, I think of it—almost all the time I think of it."

"What would you do if you got out? There must be something you would sooner do than stay here."

The old man fidgetted uneasily. "Well miss, I expect we all have our secret ambitions, and there is one thing I often wish I could do. You mustn't ask me what...It wouldn't take long. But I do feel that if I had done it I could settle down again easier, and devote myself to the poor crazed people here."

There were tears in Angela's eyes that afternoon as she drove away "He shall have his little outing, bless him" she said.

From that day onwards Angela had a new purpose in life.

She cross examined any guests who had pretensions to legal or medical knowledge, and she showed extreme good will to old Sir Roderick Lane-Fosket their Member of Parliament.

Finally Sir Roderic wrote to the Home Office, the necessary papers were signed and by the end of the hunting season Angela had triumphed.

Mr Loveday achieved his liberty.

His departure was marked by some ceremony.

Angela and Sir Roderick sat with the doctors on the stage of the gymnasium. Below them were assembled everyone in the institution who was thought to be stable enough to endure the excitement.

Lord Moping presented Mr Loveday, on behalf of the wealthier lunatics, with a gold cigarette case, and the warders gave him a silver watch.

The doctor made a speech "Remember " he remarked "if at any time in the future you should grow tired of your life in the outside world, there will always be a welcome for you here. Your post will be open."

Mr Loveday was ceremoniously led down the drive, the iron gates opened and Mr Loveday stepped into his freedom.

He was well provided with money and the general impression was that he would go to London and enjoy himself a little, before visiting his step sister in Plymouth.

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It was to the surprise of all that he returned within two hours of his liberation. He was smiling, a gentle self regarding smile of reminiscence.

“I’ve enjoyed myself very much” he told the doctor “I’ve been promising myself one little treat, all these years. It was short sir, but most enjoyable. Now I shall be able to settle down again to my work here without any regrets.”

Half a mile up the road from the asylum gates, they later discovered an abandoned bicycle.

It was a lady’s machine of some antiquity.

Quite near in the ditch lay the strangled body of a young woman, who, riding home to her tea, had chanced to overtake Mr Loveday, as he strode along, musing on his opportunities.