

## The Corner Shop Casanovas

Being without a father in the Thirties had many disadvantages, not least of them the lack of someone to boast about.

Of course, a boy in such a situation might have his mother to fall back upon, but it was not the same thing. Telling your pals that she made the best date pudding in the world cut no ice at all. Without question, a male parent was essential. And it was my desire to have someone to boast about that prompted me to attempt to play Cupid on behalf of my widowed mother.

The story began not long after we had moved to the home of Aunt Maud and Uncle Jack. I had two candidates in mind for my new dad, both of whom had made it plain in various ways that they had a warm spot for my mother; Bill Clarke and Fred Starling. By coincidence, both were shopkeepers, but the similarity ended there and it was Mr Starling who I preferred.

He was quieter and more discrete about his affections for my mother, sometimes slipping a packet of Woodbines into the shopping bag and whispering ‘Just a present for your mam.’

Mr Clarke on the other hand could never be discreet. Now and again he would cut off a few pieces of bacon wrap them in a sheet of greaseproof paper, and toss the package across the counter.

‘Give that to your mam with my compliments,’ he would say in a loud voice, following up with a wink for the benefit of any men who happened to be in the shop.

Thus it was that it was Mr Starling who met with my approval but the question was: How could I eliminate the other suitor from the contest.

I knew it would not be easy. Mr Clarke had a far more positive approach to wooing, but it was at this stage in the story that the awful Pikey Hull arrived on the scene, although I have to admit that involving him in my plan was done on the spur of the moment.

Pikey Hull was heartily disliked by everyone in Wordsworth Street, mainly because he was an aggressive bully and everybody was frightened of him – children and grown-ups alike.

The day that Pikey became involved in my life, my mother had instructed me to call at Mr Clarke’s shop on my way home from school to pick up a quarter of potted meat for our tea. Before handing over the paper bag, Mr Clarke said, ‘Hang on a minute.’

He took a piece of paper from under the counter, scribbled on it, folded it twice, and pushed it into my hand.

‘Give that to your mam for me,’ he said. ‘And don’t lose it on the way home.’

As I set off along Wordsworth Street I could not resist the temptation. I unfolded the paper and read its contents: ‘Dear Madge,’ it said, ‘would you like to come to the pictures with me on Friday, love Billy boy.’

I was so appalled by the prospect that I did not look where I was going and bumped into Pikey Hull, who true to character, grabbed me by the ear and gave it a vicious pull that lifted me onto my toes.

‘Why don’t you look where you’re going?’ he growled.

‘Sorry Mr Hull,’ I bleated, but even as I uttered the apology, a plan leapt into my mind. It was built around the simple but vital fact that Pikey’s wife and my mother shared the same Christian name – Madge.

‘Mr Clarke down at the shop asked me to give this to Mrs Hull,’ I said, holding up the note.

Pikey snatched it from my hand and read it, his lips forming the words as he did so. His rage was terrible and a torrent of swear words could be heard all along the street as he marched off in the direction of Mr Clarke's shop. I ran after him.

When he reached the shop, Pikey flung open the door, strode in, grasped the unsuspecting Mr Clarke by the collars of his tweed jacket and pulled him halfway across the counter.

'You keep away from my Madge,' Pikey bellowed 'If I catch you as much as looking at her again I will smash you to pieces – and your bleeding shop. Have you got that?'

'Sorry Mr Hull,' spluttered the hapless Mr Clarke. 'I didn't know.'

As I made my way back to Aunt Maud's house I could not help but entertain a feeling of satisfaction. My off-the-cuff scheme had worked out admirably. Now the way was open for Mr Starling to pursue his wooing without a rival. Not for the first time I was wrong.

The following Saturday my mother appeared to be on edge – not in an irritable, nervy way, but pleasantly excited as though in anticipation of something. I was even more puzzled when she announced that she had an appointment at the hairdressers. Something was afoot.

'There's someone coming for tea,' my mother explained as she helped me put a Windsor knot in my tie. 'Now, you'll be a good boy, won't you? You won't let me down, will you?'

The visitor arrived on the stroke of four 'o' clock. He was of medium height, but strongly built, and he wore a navy blue three-piece suit. My mother was almost twinkling with pleasure. After the grown up formalities had been concluded, she drew me to her and said with a dazzling smile, 'And this is my Ronnie. Ronnie, I would like you to meet my new friend, Ray.'

'Hello Ronnie,' said the man. He took my hand and shook it vigorously, just as though I had adult status, then reached in his pocket and drew out a small but well-filled paper bag.

'You like soldiers, don't you?' he said, handing me the bag. I opened it and looked inside. It contained about ten lead soldiers in Grenadier Guard's uniforms. As far as I was concerned, it was a marvellous start to the visit.

Towards the end of the meal Ray saw me looking at a red and blue mark showing below the cuff of his right sleeve.

'Do you know what that is?' he asked.

I shook my head.

'It's a tattoo,' he said, rolling up his sleeve to show a snake entwined round a dagger. He then rolled up his other sleeve to reveal an identical tattoo on his left arm.

Aunt Maud did not look too impressed, but my mother said 'I think they are pretty and colourful.' And no one disagreed with her.

Later on Ray took my mother into the town for a drink. I stayed with Aunt Maud and Uncle Jack and I heard them talking as they did the washing up.

'He'll be alright for our Madge, don't you think, Jack?' said Aunt Maud.

'Course he will,' said Uncle Jack. 'Seems like a nice bloke to me.'

So there it was – a ready-made dad on the way with no help whatsoever from me. But much as I appreciated the gift of the lead soldiers, Ray did not quite match up to Mr Starling in my eyes. The quiet shopkeeper was still my favourite.

Little did I know there would be an incident on the day of the forthcoming Silver Jubilee of King George V and Queen Mary that would alter my views on this matter completely.

Like most streets in most towns and villages throughout the country, the residents of Wordsworth street had been planning a Jubilee party for the children. The street was a hive of activity, most residents being occupied with the job of draping colourful home-made bunting across the fronts of their houses. Then one of the men, Mr Bradbury from number 33, unfurled a large Union Jack flag.

‘Where shall we fly it?’ he asked his fellow committee members.

They pondered for a few seconds and then one of them said, ‘Well there’s only one place for it – right at the top of The Pole.’

They were speaking of a thirty-feet tall, cast iron column that rose from the pavement not far from Aunt Maud’s house. No one knew for certain exactly what purpose it served, but it was generally considered that it was used to disperse excessive gases that built up in the sewer system. Residents simply referred to it as ‘The Pole’ and left it at that.

‘Nobody’s got a ladder long enough to reach the top of that,’ said Mr Bradbury. ‘Somebody will have to shin up it if we want it to fly right at the top.’ Immediately one of the younger men volunteered to make the climb. He managed to climb six or seven feet, but then slid back to the ground, admitting that the task was beyond him.

Encouraged by their wives and offspring, half a dozen more men made the attempt but, like the first volunteer they did not get far.

Looking round I noticed my mother standing with Ray at the back. She leaned close to him and whispered in his ear. He nodded and came to the front of the crowd.

‘I’ll have a try, if you like,’ he said quietly.

He took the flag and tucked a corner of it in his belt. After a quick glance at my mother, he curled his legs around the column and began to shin skywards. Without pause, and at a surprising speed, he reached the top, gripping the pole with his knees while he tied the Union Jack in place. There was a spontaneous burst of applause from the crowd. I was so filled with pride that I could not resist the lie.

‘That’s my dad,’ I announced to the children gathered near me.

‘No he’s not,’ said a knowing girl with a runny nose, ‘He’s your mam’s fancy man. I heard my gran say so.’

I refused to be defeated. ‘He will be my dad – one day,’ I replied.

I turned my attention to the top of the pole. Ray was grinning with satisfaction. He looked down at my mother, flipped the peak of his white cloth cap with the tips of his fingers, and blew her a kiss. She put both hands to her mouth and blew him a double one in return.

Ray then made a searching look around the crowd until he spotted me. He gave me a cheery wave. For the first time ever, I had a hero I could boast about to all my friends. King George V himself could not have been happier on that glorious day.