

The Okapi

*"Symbol Of Modesty"*

The clock chimed four times, 4 pm, the fire was burning low and the sun was far along its decent for the evening. Elizabeth lay her bookmark delicately over the page of her book and closed it, setting it aside on the table next to her arm chair. She stoked the fire and set another log onto the embers, her mother and father should be back anytime now. The grey clouds hung heavy in the faltering afternoon light, casting a dull, sollem aura over the living room. Elizabeth flicked a match and methodically moved around the room, lighting one candle after another.

She heard the rattling of the front door being unlatched, and the murmur of voices coming down the hall, as the footsteps came closer, Elizabeth set herself back down in her arm chair, flattened out her dress over her legs and took a deep breath in. A cold air rushed into the room along with her parents, the candlelights flickered and the embers of the fire spluttered.

"Oh mother, good afternoon, how was it?" Elizabeth addressed her mother with a sweet smile, and more formally addressed her father, "sir, I have set a new log on the fire, and lit the candles just this minute."

"Lizzy, darling, it was a bore, as I'm sure you would have guessed" her mother replied with a smirk on her lips, which brought an easily smile to Elizabeth's lips.

"Did you get all your errands done this morning then?" Asked her father, sternly and avoiding any unnecessary pleasantries,

"Yes Sir, well actually," Elizabeth trailed off, looking down at her lap and fiddling with the fabric of her dress, "there's something I wanted to mention to you two,"

"Very well, what is it? Did you forget to take the notes to Mrs. Baddington again? Did you not collect my eye-glasses from Mr. Pretin? Don't tell me you didn't collect the potatoes for our supper this evening?" Her father cut through any warmth emanating from the recent addition of the log on the fire with his cold, misguided indignation.

"No, sir, I dropped off the notes, Mrs. Baddington was very grateful, and sends her regards to yourself and the whole family. Mr. Pretin and I had a lovely catch up, your eye-glasses are on your desk in the study. I collected the

potatoes for this evenings meal, and Nancy even gifted me an extra pie, which you can have for your dinner tomorrow." Elizabeth replied, biting her tongue and maintaining a soft expression, so as to not irritate her father further.

"Very well then. I'm sure I don't need to be bothered with your idle gossip, I have too much work to be done. I shall be in the study, please don't call for me until tea is ready." He turned on his heels and left the room,

"Tell me dear, what is you wish to share" asked her mother, sitting herself down on the sofa and elegantly removing her left hand glove,

"You see mother, the thing is, well, this morning, down at Nancy's, well, I met someone, well a man I mean" Elizabeth could barely get the words out,

"Oh. I see." He mother paused pulling off her right glove, her gaze transfixed and lost in the glow of the fire embers, "And who, was, *he*?" pulling her hand free of the glove with the emphasis on the he.

"He introduced himself as Ronald, but I noticed the package of vegetables he was collecting from Nancy was labelled R. Pretin, so one must assume he is a relative of Mr. Pretin" Elizabeth had managed to compose herself and replied with calmness, "do you remember I used to play with the older Pretin boy, I think it was him"

"Ronald, it can't be. Last I heard he was on a ship, heading to the Congo. Some sort of science trip, or so I was told... no you must be mistaken" her mother dismissed Elizabeth's claims and proceeded to the door, "I'm going to check with Mary about our supper, don't mention this to your father"

Elizabeth gently wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, she took a breath in and smoothed her dress over her knees. Picking up her book and opening it to where she had left off she began again,

*"It is a fair, even-handed, noble adjustment of things, that while there is infection in disease and sorrow, there is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good humour."*

This gifted her lips another easy smile, and her beauty began to once again add a comfortable glow to the room, accompanied by the burning logs in the fire place.

There came a knocking on the front door, slow, deliberate and calm,

Elizabeth heard her mother muttering to herself on the way to the door,

"Who is that at this time? ... Don't they know Mr. Eliot is working... they better not disturb him, it'll be us that has to deal with him this evening..."

Elizabeth placed her finger on the paper, "*humour*" holding her place on the page as she looked up and listened intently as to who had come knocking,

The door opened,

"Mrs. Eliot, how do you fare this afternoon?" Elizabeth recognised it instantly,

"Ronald" replied her mother, clearly startled, Elizabeth silently mouthing the name in unison, "I heard from your father that you were travelling to the Congo?"

"Yes, I spent 14 months there, it was quite spectacular, although got a bit ill if I'm honest, rotten luck. I returned from London this morning" Ronald had a smile on his lips, in an unknown manner it was in perfect harmony with Elizabeth, as she sat, book in her lap, finger on the page, smile on her lips.

"Who's there?! Come in and shut the door or leave will you" rumbled Mr Eliot from the study,

"Apologise, Ronald, would you like to come in?"

"I shan't stay for long, I came to call upon your Elizabeth if I may, she said she would inform you of my coming"

"Oh. Right. I see. Well come in and speak to Mr Eliot will you" Mrs. Eliot ushered him in and showed him to the study, gently knocking on the door before she slowly pushed it open,

"George, this is Ronald Pretin, he has just returned from London, and it appears he crossed paths with our Elizabeth this morning"

"Ronald, yes, yes, I remember you. What is it I can do for you? Can't talk long, I really must get my work done"

"Well sir, it was actually your Elizabeth I have come to see"

"Elizabeth is it?"

"Yes sir, we ran into each other this morning, down at Nancy Groutch's Grocers"

"And you want me to offer her to you for marriage? Is that what this is about?"

the study door flung open,

"Father, how dare you?! I am not your's to offer! I am able to make my own decisions about who I should wish to marry"

"I do apologise, I never meant to start any trouble" Ronald quickly intruded, "after I saw you this morning Elizabeth, I simply couldn't help but

lay eyes on you again. On my travels and in the great forests of the Congo I saw many exotic things, and I saw them again this morning, in you. I saw the grace of the leopard, the strength of the buffalo, the beauty of the peacock and the modesty of the okapi. It was as if I were stood on the edge of a great forest, bewildered once more at the wonders before me."

"Ronald, you flatter me far too much. If you are free, we shall go for a walk this evening?"

"Of course Elizabeth, it would be my pleasure"

"Mother, Father, I shall be back in time for supper"

The clock chimed 5 times and the front door shut. Two figures followed the driveway on towards the country lane, arm in arm and a gentle laughter emanating from the couple.