

THE MAN WHO LOVED DAFFODILS

by KEVIN KNIGHT

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[This story was written by my younger brother, Kevin in March 1988. Since he was fifteen, Kevin has worked as a gardener in Regents Park. He has many stories to tell about the park and its visitors; this is one of them. It is not fiction. Written immediately after the events described, every word is true. In 2008, a film was made of Kevin's story; it was shown in Regent's Park during the late summer in 'the smallest cinema in the world'. Chris Knight August 31 2005].

THE MAN WHO LOVED DAFFODILS

By Kevin Knight

He approached as I was cutting the grass in Regent's Park. Stopping and sniffing the Spring air he pronounced:

— This is beauty!

— Yes, it is, I replied, well used to concurring with oft repeated banalities concerning the beauty of the park.

— See those daffodils over there, he pointed, each one is an artform, a masterpiece of nature. I was happy to agree. He introduced himself as John Lawrie, the artist. He had studios in London and Bristol and was shortly to hold an exhibition of his works at the Festival Hall, to which I was invited.

We got on to discussing art and artists.

— All truly great artists are revolutionaries, he said. I am a revolutionary, he announced.

— Yes? I said, my interest aroused. As if to allay any possible doubts I may have had about his revolutionary credentials, he launched into a tirade against capitalism in general and the conspiracy of Zionism and Freemasonry in particular.

Waving his broly in the direction of the Nash terraces:

— At this very minute, he said, they are conspiring against us in their secret clubs.

— I expect they are, I said.

Perhaps finding encouragement in my observation, he said that recognising in me a fellow artist and revolutionary, he proposed to take me into his confidence.

Feeling rather flattered, I listened respectfully as he outlined his plans to build his revolutionary party.

— I am, he said, an extremely wealthy man and am in control of about fifty major companies and finance houses.

He also let slip that he was of the aristocracy and was an intimate of circles close to the Queen, one member of which, a duchess, he would be dining with that evening.

— The true aristocracy, he said, find the royals vulgar. I agreed that they probably would.

He then revealed to me his plan to set up a workers' dictatorship, on a Marxist-Leninist model. His plans involved buying out the remaining companies and banks which he did not own. This to be done with the aid of powerful backers in America, men who, he said, wanted to "do England down". And when he had obtained control he would announce the Revolution and the end of capitalism.

This novel and ingenious plan to seize state power won my almost unreserved admiration and recognizing, as he did, that here, standing before me was the Lenin of the British Revolution, I readily fell in with his plans.

This agreement was strengthened quite considerably when he said he was going to give me £5000 to furnish a barge on the Regents Canal.

— Canals and waterways, he explained to me, are no-go areas as far as the State is concerned. They come under the jurisdiction of another authority. On this barge, he said, myself and other specially chosen and selected lieutenants of his could plan the revolution, free from mundane financial worries and interference from the forces of the state.

Mr Lawrie, the artist and revolutionary leader then shook hands with me, and said he had to be off. He would see me again tomorrow. The conversation he had just had with me, he said, was amongst the most interesting he had ever had in his life.

The following morning Mr Lawrie invited myself and a blonde girl he had met in the park, to meet him on Friday evening at 7pm at the National Theatre, and from there we would go to dinner and discuss his plans for the revolution.

I arrived at the National Theatre on Friday, at 7pm on the 18th of March. Mr Lawrie was sitting in the foyer, staring at the ceiling. He was very pleased to see me and told me had spent the day walking around Camden Lock where he had talked with his old friend Lawrence, who sold paintings there. Lawrence was a marvellous character and also a revolutionary, he said, and we would be meeting him later in the evening for dinner.

By 7.30, the blonde girl not having arrived, Mr Lawrie said we would wait no longer, as our table was booked for 8pm. We left the National Theatre, Mr Lawrie hailed a taxi, and we arrived at

a very expensive-looking French restaurant somewhere in Mayfair.

The waiter had reserved a table for four, and Mr Lawrie explained that one of his party had been unable to come, but that he was expecting a third party shortly. He asked the waiter to inform the chef that an artist was eating with his friends, and would the chef, as a fellow artist, prepare the dishes with that in mind. The waiter, looking somewhat bemused, said that he would pass on the message.

We started the meal with a very good champagne with caviar and olives. When we were on the second bottle of champagne, Lawrence arrived. His arrival aroused a tremor of interest as his appearance was that of a chubby Andy Cap. He wore rimless spectacles, had slightly bulging eyes, and wore a shabby cloth cap which he never removed. He seemed to me not to fit in very smoothly with the smart bourgeois clientele of the restaurant.

The waiter, however, attended him with every politeness, no doubt allowing for artistic license in an artist's choice of friends. The conversation returned to Mr Lawrie's insurrectionary scheme and Lawrence was asked what he thought about waterways.

— What do you mean waterways? said Lawrence. Mr Lawrie explained it all to Lawrence, who seemed sceptical, his bulging eyes signalling doubt. However, when offered like myself £5,000 to start him off on the barge as one of Mr Lawrie's chosen lieutenants he quickly came around to seeing the advantages of the plan. He revealed that he had once been a member of the Workers' Revolutionary Party and would get in contact with numerous other ex-members. Mr Lawrie said that each one would have to be vetted by himself. Lawrence said that of course he understood that.

Meanwhile, a marvellously elaborate series of tasty dishes were regularly placed before us, Mr Lawrie being kind enough to order what he thought myself and Lawrence would like. On one occasion however, seeing that Lawrence and I had a particularly delicious scallop dish, he seemed rather peeved and ordered it for himself also. On being presented with it he quickly swallowed it, pronounced it delicious, and asked for another one.

Mr Lawrie said he would be driving up to Stratford on Avon to stay with his friend Sir Eric Porter, the actor. There would be plenty of girls there, actresses and the like, and we could, of course, have any girl we liked.

- What about Princess Anne? said Lawrence, by way of a joke I thought.

- Mr Lawrie, perhaps piqued that his influence to procure royalty was being questioned, snapped: If you really want her then I will get her for you. But I don't think you really do.

- Lawrence agreed that perhaps he did not.

At around 11pm having got through half a dozen courses, with a new wine selected to accompany each new course, we got on to the sweet course. We chose raspberries out of season, couched in a fragrant wine or liqueur, with plenty of clotted cream. After brandy, coffee, and Havanah cigars I suggested to my host that I had better be leaving, as I had a train to catch. Mr Lawrie looked surprised and said not to worry about that, as his chauffeur would drive myself and Lawrence home.

At about half past eleven Mr Lawrie signalled the waiter to say he was just popping outside to see if his chauffeur had arrived. As it happened Mr Lawrie never returned. After waiting for about

ten minutes myself and Lawrence grew uneasy. The suspicion crossed our minds that perhaps Mr Lawrie was an impostor, had taken us for a ride and was leaving us to foot the bill which, Lawrence believed, must be round about £800.

— How long have you known that geezer? I asked Lawrence.

— Known him? I met him this morning, in the Market, said Lawrence.

We decided that we had better slip away as unobtrusively as possible. On the way out, I picked up Mr Lawrie's brolly. It had a very nice, ornately carved handle. The waiter wanted us to stay and wait for our friend, but once outside the door we ran for it. Myself one way and Lawrence another.

I never saw Mr Lawrie again. Indeed the only tangible evidence I have of the great man's existence is his brolly. But perhaps he is at this moment still plotting the destruction of the capitalist system in some select West End club, restaurant, or barge on England's waterways.

Kevin Knight, March 1988
