

When He Was First Reviewed

Flavia Mollweide was eyeing herself in the glass. She was about to attend the performance of presentation pieces at the National Academy for Musical Arts. She intended that her position should once again be subtly reinforced by the effect her attire created, both on arrival and on closer examination. Flavia thoroughly enjoyed the pomp and ritual occasioned by her attendance. So much so that she had deliberately absented herself the previous year. In the flocculent prose that had first distinguished her, she had written to the Master of the Academy expressing deep regret at being rendered incapacitate by an unseasonable ailment. In place of her much anticipated review of the Presentation Concert, the news-sheet to which she contributed had carried a rework of the content of the letter with considerable elaboration as to the cause of that regret. Flavia had not been aware of her need to convey a sense of the guilt she felt at being unable to bear the burden of responsibility, for furthering the greater cultural good, that the public had placed on her, even for one, albeit important, day.

Gorain Gomphose, a student at the Academy, to whom she had been paying especial private interest, had, as previously arranged, visited her that evening. The evening of what she had even then decided to refer to as The Missing Year. Gorain had played out for her the escalating hysteria of hypotheses as to the true reason for her failure to attend offered by academy tutors, representatives of other news-sheets, students, parents and a clutch of hacks from the Gossips, alerted alarmingly rapidly to the fact she was indisposed. Flavia had been initially mortified, gradually mollified, eventually overcome with hilarity. Only later, in the early hours of the morning and with the lack of tiredness of those recovering from illness who have had a surfeit of rest, Flavia had realised that Gorain could not have witnessed directly all of the events he had relayed to her. She had reflected also on how much she had hoped for such reactions and needed them to be true.

The dresser she had hired for the evening was fussing ineffectually with the fastenings at Flavia's neck. What others often judged to be a sniping intolerance towards the lower serving class was, Flavia knew, a wholly equitably-displayed frustration towards the effort of people who evidently did not have sufficient pride to demand high enough standards of themselves. The dresser seemed to be bracing herself rather than attending to the job in hand. Unnecessary. As was being evidenced tonight, should good reason, such as a costume being wholly outwith a dresser's experience, account for a difficulty, she never said a word. Not in remonstrance or advice. Knowledge others sought to place in your head did not take as well as that acquired by experience. Flavia had enough time to be gracious. The concert would hardly start without her.

The costume was neither fashionable, nor unfashionably familiar. Flavia was submerged in variegated green slubbed silk dotted with an embroidered wild

flower meadow. She had a hat resembling a three-legged stool, hung with long threads of pure white opal teardrop beads, attached, or nearly attached, to hair transformed to the colour and consistency of straw. The stool was fashioned from new, near weightless, wood of the kind that the scientists had been using in their experiments with winged flight; its usual bleached coloration had been disguised with a wash of dark-brown liquid, the source of which Flavia had been disinclined to establish. Flavia had designed this outfit herself. She was inordinately proud of both the costume and herself.

Her reaction to the attack five years ago had been inspired. A public who had moments before been intruding on her privacy, metaphorically probing with salacious fingers for more gossip and relishing her fall had taken her back to their hearts, and most significantly minds, with renewed vigour. She had known only a situation of acute fascination would have brought her friend to her door at that hour of the morning. The curiosity his arrival piqued had turned flat and sour as soon as she realised she was already the object of sniggering convulsion amongst people of every class and circumstance. She had been glad it had been him bringing the news first. She was, then and now, supremely confident that his interest in her well-being was exercised entirely free of the frisson Gorain sometimes seemed to experience when she was discomforted. Although it was not Gorain then, the incident was before she had picked him out. What was the previous one's name? No matter. She always selected younger students and she expected some degree of immaturity in their dealings with her. If feeling she was, purely temporarily, at lower ebb made them feel, even more temporarily, superior, it was hardly a matter for reproach. She had enough self-esteem to voluntarily offer sustenance to those trying so hard to build their own.

Flavia insisted, when asked, that she could not now recall the name of the rival who had ferreted around her servants with blandishments that were utterly unnecessary. All of them would have betrayed her for an old pin. What had been surprising to her was not that the essayist had found it so simple to encourage the staff to spill, rather that any of them had been able to provide information of any value. Flavia had been thorough, so she had thought, in selecting services only from lower-downs without any conceivable connection to her past. The insidious power of gossip never ceased, even today, to astound her. A trail had been begun. Crumbs had taken the betrayer of professional integrity from the leaf-lined inner court of her town-house, inherited by means of Flavia's own coins and not by being in, or making, a line to one of the venerable families. Down the curled stone steps of the public face, and through the balconied quarter reserved for those few ancient lineages that constituted the immovable features of the city's circles of influence. Down narrow city boulevards, down straight arteries of the highways, down winding country green lanes. Flavia would have to concur that the author of her intended destruction must have had a facility with words to describe someone so changed sufficiently well that those grubbers and dullwits at the inns and other stops along the way had recognised, surely you don't mean, Molly Weidel?

When her friend had taken her hands and informed her that the streets were agog at the story, published not in the commissioning news-sheet of her adversary but in the meanest of the Gossips for maximum exposure, Flavia had said nothing. Her friend had urged her to issue a rebuttal, if possible, a countering statement at least. He would, of course, put his news-sheet at her disposal. They both knew that without her the sheet would still languish in the doldrums of the middle ground. As the pre-eminent chronicler of the city's cultural life, she was alone in her ability to habitually identify stirrings of promised greatness. She usually did so before their possessor was so certain, and always just ahead of a city elite feeling the first prickles of thirst for new refreshment as the current taste began to feel slightly dull to the senses.

Her friend had generously conceded his fear. He desperately believed, and wanted her to believe, that the greater part of his feelings arose purely from seeing her in such distress. But he considered dishonesty unmanly. He must therefore admit to thoughts that should she remain a laughing stock, and such by dint of seemingly having built such an edifice of high refinement on such base and muddy foundations, then the fortunes his news-sheet would be reduced to nothing. Of course, he had some small skill as a writer himself. He could doubtless make much among his discerning male readership that the perpetration of such a vile deception had been possible only through a woman's mendacity. In the early days, they had discussed together, had they not, whether her remarkable impact could be explained by the new pastime in the gentlemen's clubs of debating whether her pieces were the work of a woman, as claimed, or of a man under a nom de plume. Although time passing, her consistent excellence and her clear demonstration of her membership of the fairer sex during appearances before an ever-growing public had diminished such discussion, he would find a ready audience still. He had been a victim as much as they, more so as he had been personally cheated by someone whose singular progress had relied on his own willingness to risk his news-sheet's reputation on the employment of a female.

But that would be his position of last defence. He would do everything in his power to prevent the need to resort to such desperate measures. The current course was clear. The whole kittididdle was preposterous. They must fight back together. She would write a scathing tract exposing the reason, the only conceivable reason, a fellow critic would invade her past and print such a scurrilous diatribe. Simple professional jealousy. Who would doubt that lies and fabrications were the only weapons left to one of such mean talent? Who would fail to see that when a rival was failing utterly to even ride Flavia's coat tails the only response left to a trifling peddler of tripe was to cause the crowd to look away from her, even though the promised excitement would prove to be nothing but phantoms? Flavia had said nothing. She had seen. The news-sheets of her and her rival would engage in a profitable game of claim and counter-claim, readership of both publications would rise, factions of opinion would form. The

dispute would feed those who dined at the tables of Gossip for months, years. Even the impeccably correct news-sheets of antagonist and protagonist would become tinged with the implacable piercing insistence of scandal. If she sought to defend her authority, the very act would deflect her from writing the critical and cultural commentaries, the quality and prescience of which she knew had value beyond her own prideful career.

Flavia had refused to be swept along by the flood of the crisis. She had taken the only other course open to her. For the first time in her life, she spent the day, or at least what was left of it after she had managed to dismiss her dear friend, who had left in bemused and disappointed silence, engaged in activity other than the authorship of that week's news-sheet page. She had called the court couturier and offered him an absurd sum of money to create a witty and provocative refashioning of a milkmaid's outfit to be ready and delivered to her by late afternoon. She contrived, by means of the bribing and threatening of the serving classes, to discover where her rival intended to spend his evening. Serendipitously, he was to dine with the Master of the National Academy and the Director of the National Orchestra at the most exclusive establishment in the city; a place bursting from every well-dressed seam with all manners of public figure and hanger-on. She had then invited to join her, for light alcoholic refreshment before luncheon, a passing acquaintance that counted everyone as a friend. Seemingly distraught at the turn of events, she had fallen at the first gentle push of concern and revealed that she meant to confront that damned man over his dinner.

When she had walked into the dining hall, every pair of eyes had refocused, every jaw had slackened and every set of lips had ceased to stir in either conversation or consumption. She had looked magnificent. She was the daughter of country farmers. With style and conviction. Character and capability were earned. She had smiled politely at her enemy and requested a table, deposing a small-town family who had placed their name on the list seven years ago in anticipation of the celebration of the coming of age of the eldest son. Flavia sat down. The ripple of applause built into a raucous approval of the act, of the woman. The Master and Director came to extend their courtesies, and remained. Even the Gossip hacks whooped a few times before setting forth into the night ready to describe to hungry readers of the next day's first editions the triumph of her reversal of fortune: past and present. The name of her rival disappeared immediately from the news-sheet of his erstwhile employer and only slightly less rapidly from the lips and minds of the public.

Since that marvellous, hard-earned triumph, Flavia had always worn a costume glorifying her pastoral upbringing to every major event she attended, even though the need to exceed last year had ensured her outfits tended now towards the pantomimic rather than the original avant-garde couture. Flavia was secure: the darling of the elite for her erudition, the sweet-heart of the common for her gumption.

Flavia was also proud to have remained a nice person. She had determined to be so from the start, and had made it a professional characteristic that she never wrote a destructive commentary on any performance or performer. The stance was, in her own mind, the first secret of success and one which, Flavia suspected, largely accounted for the enthusiasm with which her riposte to her antagonist had been greeted. The first murmurs of hoorah and the loudest shouts of passionate support had emanated from those most intimately concerned with the cultural world. She had held, and still held, a unique position as a critic whose reputation stood on a refusal to further her own popularity by the denigration of the efforts of others. However witty the effect produced, someone would be hurt and hurt people hate. Flavia regretted that her renown now meant the Gossips routinely announced her pledges to attend an event. She knew they would discover them anyway and preferred to nurture a mutually pleasant relationship. Flavia was hardly responsible for the wide understanding that only when she had nothing nice to say did she say nothing at all.

Flavia became slowly aware that the dresser had ceased all movement some time ago and was standing behind her shoulder looking at Flavia's absent eyes in the glass, apparently waiting for Flavia's attention but unwilling to seek it. "Fine, you can go." The dresser opened her mouth. Flavia did not wish to know whether the thought behind the motion was to object to the abruptness of the dismissal or to attempt a pleasantry for the purpose of securing a small token.

Flavia had work to do. Tonight would, she knew, prove to be an examination surpassing anything she had risked in the past. Flavia was frightened. Even though she knew and repeatedly told herself that it would, by the very nature of the step she was choosing to take, be many years before the public could reach any damning conclusions should she prove to be wrong. But she wasn't wrong. But she was returning to the comfort of old insecurities. Flavia had always found it vaguely disquieting that no one else appeared to have formed the same, what now seemed to her obvious, conclusion. Hence she had existed in a state of mild underlying fear since coming to it herself that she would either be defrocked as a fraud or deposed by a fresher contender should anyone else stumble across what had fallen into her path. She had discovered a seemingly infallible method for distinguishing the type of performers and performances that would be received favourably by the public, and her talent for honeyed prose allowed the exceptionally nice things she needed to say about them to be convincing even where her own taste was compromised.

Flavia countered the fluttering of doubt with her familiar, gentle, and only ever expressed within the privacy of her mind, chastisement for being unreasonably modest. Yes, one might consider it simply good fortune to pick out, quite by chance, a young musician whose talent had soared and entranced in the months following her complimentary review. Yes, one might consider it a mere kindness of fate that the unknown musician, Kilder, had no other critic who thought him

worthy of any attention and therefore no one else present at his birth as witnessed by the public eye on which he could bestow his gratitude for a review, any review. Yes, fortuitous accident could explain why there was no one else but Flavia that the newly emerging "cultura juvenilia" movement could acclaim as their new champion: fearless, undaunted by convention, willing to hazard a young, contemporary shell held a spirit of maturity and depth. Except. One might also consider that, excluded from all events of any distinction or promise by an establishment hostile to all unknowns but especially to her gender, she had not crept away to cry, she had chosen to suffer dirt and indignity travelling to provincial concerts. Flavia Mollweide had made her own fortune. She had known both that the future's great must emerge from somewhere, and that there was no certainty that talent only developed among the young of wealthy city citizens. She had had the courage to look in smelly, disreputable holes and had been rewarded by being the one to find the jewel. In the turmoil following the discovery, one Gossip had even become giddy with the prospect of marriage, but Flavia Kilder could never have been.

One might also suggest that while many received some small seed of good fortune, few had the wherewithal to nourish it, as she had, until it blossomed into the heavy fertility of its early promise. Flavia had not become over-awed by, or profligate in exploiting the results of, her success. She had sat down quietly, taken moments away from the sustained glare of interest in her, to work out why that one young man had been so perfect for his time. The simplicity of the answer she reached shocked her: he offered the anti-theses of the facets of the current taste that had previously made it seem unique. Flavia's understanding of cultural mores was far from simplistic. Still relatively young when Fate had entwined the thread of her life with that of Kilder, she had barely slept for several years as she studied the histories, the academic theories, even the social commentaries, that would illuminate a vast pattern of small rejections and rediscoveries alternating under stronger, larger themes that themselves represented pendulum shifts between the dominance of reason and emotion.

Flavia was frightened not because she was sure that a new movement was imminent, she had enough past success for confidence of that, but because she thought, no knew, it was the first seizure of the forces of raw emotion beginning to replace the dominance of creative reason across all of the arts. And creative reason had held sway for the last seven millennia, since the end of the Golden Age.

Flavia knew she was to be the herald. She had become adept at interpreting whispers and had heard rumours not just of precocious ability but of inexplicable proficiencies. She was going to the presentation concert. Tomorrow she would write the most important piece of her life, the first review of Bran da Brandisi, the first recognition of the genius the future would forever associate with her name.