

Safe Passage

Despite the fact that she had long ago gone to bed, the old woman decided that she had better answer the doorbell when it rang for the sixth or seventh time. After all, perhaps it was an emergency – something had happened to old Mr Maclean downstairs, or maybe the young couple's baby was arriving early? She struggled into her dressing-gown, shouting weakly that she was coming, she was coming, and then headed down her passageway to the front door. She stopped at the clock which hung on the wall. Ten past eleven. She felt that she had been asleep for hours, but maybe that wasn't so.

"I'm coming!" she said, as the bell shrilled again, urgently, in short annoyed bursts, "I'm coming, just wait a moment." As she got to the door, good sense finally prevailed, and she called out "Who's there?"

There was a confused babble of voices outside, much as you get on Halloween, or at Christmas when small carol-singers come round.

The old woman put her eye to the spy-hole and peered out into the badly-lit landing. There seemed to be some dozen or so people there.

"Who are you," she demanded more sharply, "And what do you want at this time of night?"

Faces bulged and sharply disappeared in the distorted view of the fish-eye glass. Eventually, one face, which seemed to be that of a neat young man came up close.

"Sorry to be bother you, ma'am," he said, "But we need to come through."

The old woman was puzzled. "Come through, come through?" she muttered to herself. "Whatever does he mean?"

"What do you mean, young man?" she demanded aloud. "Come through where, for what?"

"Ah, you can't have had the letter yet, I expect," he replied. "Did you not get the letter?"

"What letter?" she wanted to know. "I've not had any letters – just the usual ones from the bank, and my catalogues of course. Are you from the catalogue?"

There was a pause while the young man considered his options. "Which catalogue, ma'am?" he enquired at last.

"Well - ". There was a pause while she passed them mentally before her eyes. "Are you from the 'Kitchen Plastics Company'?" she asked. They seemed respectable sort of people.

"No, ma'am," replied the voice from the other side of the door. In the background could be heard vague mutterings of impatience and discontent.

"How about the 'New Gadgets for the Home' catalogue, then?"

"No, ma'am, not them either."

The old woman was satisfied with that – those New Gadgets people were always losing her order or sending her things she had never asked for. "Are you from the 'Sensible Footwear Foundation', then?"

"Yes, madam, that's us!" called out a different voice from the other side of the door. There was a scuffling noise, and hushing sounds. "Yes, ma'am, we're from the Sensible Shoes Company," repeated the voice.

“Oh well,” said the old woman, starting to unbolt the door and loosen the security chain, “I’m glad of that. There are some things I wanted to check before I sent in my order.”

The final turn of the key and she pulled open the door.

On the landing, dimly lit by the underpowered stair-light, stood a good ten or fifteen people, all looking anxiously at her. Most of them seemed to have bicycles and all of them were as pale as sheets. Suddenly filled with second thoughts, the old woman nervously clutched at the collar of her dressing-gown and peered at them.

“You ARE the Sensible Shoe people, aren’t you?” she asked in a quavery voice.

The nice young man who had started the conversation stepped forward. “Of course we are,” he said calmly. “May we come in?”

“Well, I suppose so. But I’m not offering you any cups of tea. Not at this time of night.” The old woman stepped back to let them all through. She counted them as they went past: thirteen in all. Just as she was about to close the door, there was the sound of hurried steps outside and another lady emerged from the gloom. She smiled gratefully at the old woman as she slipped round the door to join the throng in the passageway.

“Just go on to the end of the passage,” said the old woman, now suddenly flustered at having so many visitors at once. There had not been that many people in her flat since poor Johnny died; and even then there were only six who had come back after the funeral. She need not have bothered directing them, for most of the group were already through the living-room door, with their bicycles. Some had tandems, one even had a monocycle. The old woman came along at the rear of the crowd.

It suddenly felt chilly. When she came into the living-room, she saw that someone had opened the door to the balcony, and that people were stepping out into the cold night air, seven floors above the motorway which rushed by underneath at all times of the day and night.

“Oh, don’t go out there!” she called, suddenly vexed by the liberties these people were taking. “It’s far too cold for me!” She looked around to see where the pleasant young man had got to. To her surprise, he was standing directly in front of her. “Oh, there you are!” she exclaimed. “Tell your friends to come back inside!”

The young man looked at her gravely. “Sit down, Mrs Downing,” he said. “I need to explain something to you.”

The old woman was bewildered. “What’s going on?” she asked plaintively. “Where’s everyone going?” For, as she spoke, she realised that almost everyone had gone out through the balcony door and that that she was alone in the room with the young man. “Tell them the balcony’s not safe – not with that many people!”

In reply, the young man took her to the open balcony-door, through which the night air and the noise of the city came whistling. Placing his jacket around the old woman’s shoulders, he stepped through the door, leading Mrs Downing behind him.

To her great astonishment, there was no one on the balcony. They must have - !

“Oh!” she screamed feebly. “What have they done?!”

“Don’t worry, Mrs Downing,” came the reassuring voice of the young man. “Look...” And he pointed out into the night sky – not down, where people might be expected to plummet if foolishly they stepped off the balcony, but straight ahead. And there, in the night sky, was a straggling stream of people on bicycles, apparently floating across the sky, soon to be lost from sight in the middle distance.

The old woman stared out into the night, lost for words. Was she dreaming?

“Now then, Mrs Downing,” said the young man, steering her back into her living-room, and closing the balcony-door gently. “Perhaps we should get you a nice cup of tea?”

The old woman nodded. She made her way to the tiny kitchen and began to rattle about with the kettle and the cups. Even while she was in there, she was aware that the young man had let someone else in through the front door. She glimpsed the shape of a young woman with a rather heavy old bicycle as she passed down the passageway into the living room; as the kettle boiled, the old woman heard the balcony-door being opened, felt a cold finger of air disturb the warm flat, and then felt it vanish again.

She loaded a tray and carried it through. The young man had been standing gazing out at the night-sky. He turned round and helped her set the things out.

“Now then, Mrs Downing,” he began, pouring the tea. “I expect you’re a bit surprised by all this?”

The old woman nodded. “You said you were from the Shoe company – but you’re not really, are you?” she asked.

The young man shook his head. “No, ma’am: I apologise for that. Let me introduce myself – I am Peter. I represent the Transmigration Office. And you should have had a letter from us last week explaining what we would like you to do for us.”

“Well, I didn’t get any letter.” Mrs Downing bridled up, feeling slightly hysterical. “I told you that – I didn’t get any letter of that sort!”

“No, I know you didn’t, Mrs Downing,” said Peter in soothing manner. “My sincere apologies for that. And for suddenly coming on you like this. You see – excuse me.”

The door-bell had rung. Peter walked swiftly down the passageway and opened the door. There was a brief murmured conversation and then an elderly man, struggling with what appeared to be a heavy penny-farthing, came into the living-room. Seeing Mrs Downing, he doffed his deerstalker hat, and bowed forwards at the shoulders. Then he made for the balcony-door, which Peter had opened, and passed through. And disappeared without another sound.

“Would you mind, Mrs Downing, if I left the front-door on the latch?” Peter asked. “Only, I expect there will be quite a few more coming through before the night is over?”

The old woman nodded in a confused manner. “Do whatever you need,” she whispered.

When Peter came back from making his arrangements, he sat down again and smiled in his brightest and most encouraging manner. “Now,” he continued, “As I was about to say: the Transmigration Office always needs suitable premises to use for its services. And our surveys indicated that your home was most suitably located for our purposes. For a trial period, only, you must understand.”

The old woman looked at him, trying to retain the appearance of comprehension; but the slow shaking of her head from side to side easily revealed her lack of any such thing.

“So, as the letter would have explained,” continued Peter, “We would like to use the passageway in your flat, between the hours of eleven at night and five in the morning only, for transmigration. There will be no charge for this, of course,” he went on reassuringly. “All we ask is that your passageway is kept free of clutter, and permits an uninterrupted transmigration.”

“Young man,” said the old woman fiercely, “There is never any clutter in my passageway. Never. You may have no fear on that!”

“As you say, ma’am,” said Peter, patting the old lady’s hand, “Your passageway is one of the tidiest and most organised I have ever seen. And I’ve seen many a passageway, I can tell you. No, Mrs Downing, I think we need have no fears on that score! And I will make sure my superiors appreciate that when I report back to my office in the morning.”

Just then there was a rush of air down the hall-way and a small boy came through on his chopper-bike. Peter sprang up, adroitly flung open the balcony-door, the boy pedalled furiously through and out into the night-sky. “Perhaps...” asked Peter, holding the door ajar.

“Oh, go ahead!” said the old woman. “Better than having any accidents.”

So the balcony-door was left open.

And so the old woman changed her sleeping habits. She took a nap in the afternoon, and another in the early evening; and was ready at a quarter to eleven for the first bunch of visitors. Transient visitors. Or “transmigrants”, as the letter called them, when it arrived on the very morning after Peter’s visit. A rather splendid letter it was, too: a magnificent letterhead, and signed by none other than Sir Bernard Charon, KCMG. Mrs Downing pinned it up on her kitchen board, rather proud of it. Night after night, the transmigrants came to her door, rode down her passageway on a most startling collection of cycles, out onto the balcony and into the night. She liked to watch them dwindle into the night. Some had little lights on, and she could see the tiny red glow long after all other outline had vanished into the winds.

There was always a group of about a dozen who were waiting as eleven o’clock struck on her tiny carriage-clock on the mantelpiece. The old woman supposed that they were so keen to get on that they hid around corners until it was time. After the first big batch, they came at the rate of about one every ten minutes, all the way through to five o’clock, when she could close her door again. Before the milkman arrived. Then she would retire to bed with a drink of hot chocolate and sleep until ten.

The transmigrants were never very talkative. Always polite, apparently grateful for the service she offered and for the tidiness of her passageway: she removed the coat-stand and the small book-case which stood there, and left the hall-way entirely clear. One or two of them would stop for a brief chat, or would ask for a glass of water. There was one small boy who had obviously fallen off his bike recently, and she put a big plaster on his knee and wiped his face. And he wobbled off down the passageway and out into the night.

They never said where they had come from, nor where they were going. They all seemed glad to be on their journey, but mostly a little nervous. Mrs Downing assumed that these were people who were, in some little way – well, dead. Had just died, maybe, and were off to the afterlife. Or who had been involved in one of those dreadful traffic accidents which she was always reading about. When she thought of these things, and saw that there were quite young people passing through each night, tears came unbidden to her eyes.

Naturally, she never saw the same face twice. But it was as if they were all old friends, for there was never a cross word from any of them, even on the night when her cat-nap had lasted too long and she had not woken up until past midnight: there

was quite a throng outside the door by then, queuing down the stairwell; but not noisy or impatient. Just as soon as she opened the door, apologising in a fluster, they politely came past and set off down the hall and out into the night.

In the second week, she thought of placing a pot of tea by the door, and many of the older folks who came through stopped briefly and enjoyed a cuppa. She put out lemonade for the young ones, too, and that was gratefully received.

In the third week, she tried some home-baking – gingerbread, and rock-cakes. This proved popular as well. She also thought it would be a good idea to pin up a weather-forecast, so that they could read it as they went by – “winds gusting up to 40 mph, sleet and snow expected over higher ground” – that sort of thing.

She was puzzled – and relieved - by the fact that none of the bicycles, tandems, monocycles, choppers, mountain-bikes, and such-like ever made a mark on her carpet: not the least sign of a tyre-mark, never a drop of oil. It had not been like that when her Johnny pedalled to work – there was always a mark of rubber on the wall-paper where he scuffed it, or a drip or two of oil on the rug after he had cleaned it. But with these transmigrants, there was just peace, tranquillity and never a thing for her to clean up. Except for the tea-cups and mugs, of course. Extraordinary to tell – not even a single crumb could she find when no fewer than thirty-five people had eaten her shortbread.

And then, one night about four weeks after Peter’s visit, there was no one there at night. No one when she opened up at eleven, and still no one an hour later. The old woman checked her clock, verified that it was correct against the programme on the tv. One o’clock came and went, and still there was not a soul passing through. She put on her coat and shoes and went and peered down seven flights of stairs. No one there, except one suspicious cat, which belonged to a man on the second floor; it lay and stared at her through unblinking shining eyes suspended in the gloom.

At three o’clock, she gave up, locked the door and went to bed. On the following night, there was again no transmigration. The old woman felt all of a sudden bereft, as if some old friend had passed away. She peered closely at the letter from Sir Bernard, and noticed that it talked of a “trial period of one month”. Had she failed the trial? Why did Peter not come by and explain it to her? What had she done wrong – perhaps she should not have been so generous with her biscuits and tea...?

At last, another official-looking letter arrived. The old woman opened it with trembling fingers. “We would like to express our thanks... Trial period a great success... The monthly quota of over 700 migrants were assisted from the afterlife for re-integration into the world of the living.” Well, that startled her! Fancy that – these people were dead, but returning to the land of the living: if she could have spent some more time assisting them, perhaps some people she knew would have come through. Goodness knows she had lost a lot of friends in recent years. But – maybe – none had been great cyclists? Except Johnny.

“Unfortunately, due to a curtailment in our funding from Central Government... circumstances beyond the control of the Department... terminate our trial for at least the balance of this financial year. Many thanks for your co-operation.”

So that was that.

It was a grand morning. The sun shone out of a misty sky which was turning to blue. Mrs Downing opened the balcony door and, ignoring the sound of the traffic from below, looked out over the city to the hills beyond. Even now, she imagined

she could see lines and lines of tiny bicycles streaming outwards from her seventh-floor flat.

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