

# The Fair Sex

Ten years would pass, almost to the day, between the ending of my marriage to Pilar and my first meeting with Bente, which occurred under circumstances I still have to explain. I was fifty-four when I settled down with Bente and, to quote Winston Churchill's felicitous words about his Clementine, we lived happily ever after.<sup>1</sup> In those ten years of relative freedom, if not exactly liberty, between 1982 and 1992, I learned a great deal about women that I had not been told before or deduced for myself; and I offer these modest conclusions to my readers, for what they may be worth.

First, her late mother in Madrid had rightly taught Pilar that the way to make any marriage work is always blindly to accept responsibility for whatever may go wrong. It worked. Try it, dear ladies; it costs nothing, and works wonders (and who knows, half the time there will be on average more than an element of truth about it).

Second, I realized in due course that any given female companion could stand the thought or sight of any other woman on earth, except her immediate predecessor, or I.P.; or whatever unfortunate female is suspected of having been her I.P.

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1 *My Early Life* (Butterworth, London, 1930).

I had not known this problem with Pilar, for the obvious reason that she and I were each the first. But thereafter the I.P. phenomenon did crowd in: the I.P. may at any moment resurge, like Miss Glenn Close in the final sequence of *Fatal Attraction*, and reclaim her lost property. No acts of villainy are too foul, for ones current lady companion to deem her I.P. capable of, no thoughts too contemptible, if she is to achieve her evil ends.

I have set out this theory to audiences around the world, in the few minutes before the real event begins, and have been satisfied to hear little gasps of recognition, and to see nodding heads, among the males. These men probably all have horrendous stories to tell.

Mine ran like this. (It would be invidious to name names, but initials will suffice.) After a two-year and most chaste friendship with S. in the early 1990s, she nobly stood aside and went her own way and B. stepped in. S. had been placid and introspective, B. was aware of her beauty but satisfyingly insecure.

It was a standard scenario for I.P. disaster. I recall that it was a time of great turmoil and worldwide interest in my doings. I had been given Eichmann's papers; I had opened up the missing Goebbels Diaries in Moscow's secret archives. Many nights that summer we heard police trucks unloading the steel barricades in Duke Street, as yet another anti-Irving demonstration was planned.

Toward eight one evening, Radio New Zealand phoned – I was alone in our drawing room in London – could they phone in ten minutes for a live prime-time interview? Down there it was eight a.m., and drive time for four (••) million Kiwis.

When they rang back, in no time I was giving their listeners a friendly and introspective word picture of my life these last twelve months, what it was like here in the Mother Country, and what my plans were next. After a minute I became aware that B. was on the threshold of the room, listening. From my friendly manner it was clear to her that I must be speaking to the I.P.

Blonde hair bouncing, she crossed the room in three strides and seized the phone.

"You \*\*\*\*\* bitch," she shrilled into the mouthpiece. "I'm not going to take any more of this," and more colorful words scraped

off the same palette. “– Get off this line,” she concluded, red faced and hoarse, not waiting for any answers. “And never \*\*\*\*\* call this number again, whore!”

That was certainly the tenor of her remarks. I may have over-egged the wording slightly, my memory still glazes over in horror – it tends to skirt round that distressing scene. She tossed the phone back at me, and folded her arms in gladiatorial triumph. If she could have planted one stiletto’d heel on my prostrate chest, she probably would have

“You’ve just been speaking live,” I explained to her, “to four million New Zealanders. They phoned me for a radio interview.”

It does not always pay to have the last word. The one who really was B’s I.P. was a slim, pert thirty-five year old friend whose ladylike voice and frail figure concealed the fact that when not working for me she went on expeditions up the Amazon or to Katmandu as the personal assistant of the expedition leader, Colonel John Blashford-Snell. She had merry eyes and a tinkling laugh, a laugh which did not however tinkle when I remarked that one only had to change two letters of her name and one had “Silly Cow.” In fact she did not share the rest of the audience’s amusement at all.

One autumn I had let our apartment to the usual Middle Eastern sheikh, and since she had gone to Katmandu I camped out in her vacant apartment in north London. Now, unlike most women, I do know how to clean an apartment properly, and when she came back she found the windows polished, the rugs shampooed, and the bathroom de-limescaled and sparkling. She was not satisfied, of course. “I didn’t know you drank double vodka martinis,” she cooed into the phone a few days later.

Any man of experience can spot the ominous subliminal threat in a sentence like that. It is the equivalent of “I was going through your pockets accidentally last night, and I found *this*.”

“In Passau,” she amplified. “Three double vodka-martinis.”

My apprehensive brain began clattering on three levels simultaneously: first, I am not yet charged, and anyway innocent; second, some of that large audience in Passau joined me in my hotel

for drinks later; and third, how on earth. . . The dustbin! She had tipped out her dustbin and methodically smoothed out and scrutinized every scrap of greasy paper that she found. (Men will never, ever, go dustbinning; unless they are highly paid lawyers, that is.)

"I'll come round tomorrow and cook supper," she said, satisfied she'd scored a bull's-eye. True to her word, she let herself in and set to work.

"Had a busy day, darling?" she asked.

"Yes, a lot of writing, a lot of telephoning. . ."

"Telephoned all your tarts, I suppose," she said brightly.

It just slipped out, I suppose. It was that insecurity again, so useful at some times, so lethal at others.

By that time I had been keeping a telephone log for about thirty years. It was one of the less criminal traits of Heinrich Himmler's that I had found useful to adopt.

"Yes, one tart after another," I replied. "All day long, nothing but tarts –"

I picked up the top sheet to show her, then had second thoughts; I halted half way across, carefully and deliberately scrunched the page into a ball, opened the waste-bin drawer and continued, "– But you don't want me just to give it to you! I'll tuck it down inside the trashcan, and go out of the room for a while."

Lesson two: if you're going to score, never score as mightily as that, or *Thou Shalt Verily Go Without Supper and Much Else Besides*. From the drawing room, I heard the sound of breaking china. This kitchen symphony lasted for some minutes.

When silence returned I ventured in. The remains of dinner were oozing down the walls, toward the remains of the smashed plates littering the tile floor. Before flouncing out through back doors, she had also been careful to remove all the other food she had brought with her too.

THEY look human, I decided once, but like ants they communicate in sightless, soundless languages known only to themselves. They have a seventh sense. They can tell from in front when they are being looked at from behind. Now that we are all computer-literate,

and know what microchips and hard-wired and such concepts are, we can begin to understand them by analogy; but before Bill Gates revolutionized and rationalized our thinking, we were adrift in a Sargasso Sea of female contradictions. Is there any grown up man who has not heard in any language some variation on the plaintive cry, "If you don't know what you've done to upset me, I am not going to tell you"?

Once women accept that theirs is an endless, hopeless struggle against male cerebral superiority, that the female brain is on average ten percent smaller than the male – but never put it negatively like that, dear reader, always refer, if need be, to the female brain positively, as being, for example, "a marvel of miniaturization" – then the two sexes can begin to coexist in relative harmony.

In many ways women face an uphill struggle. How awful to be a gender which has never even produced one great symphony, let alone a Ninth. True, they may explain that they too would have been out there writing symphonies like rest of us, but they have been *oppressed*: but just who is oppressing whom? Which sex fills the more prison cells right now? True, other women may argue that they have just not *had the time* to compose great music. But how much time do they expend putting on their faces in the morning, and taking them off at night?

Their ultimate excuse is that they are *hors de combat* for one week every month. Composer Friedrich Händel composed his oratorio *Messiah* in just three weeks. So they could have fitted it in.

I WAS blessed with five beautiful and talented daughters, each of them special to me in her own way ... [etc].























