

THE THREE OBJECTS OF DESIRE

When Ambrose Rattlemouse said he was standing down, those around him should not have been surprised. But they were.

“I thought he was just pretending to be barmy – to keep us on our toes,” said Merlin Fiddler, addressing his three colleagues as they assembled in the Council chamber ante-room.

“I don’t see that going barmy is a reason to resign in itself, anyway,” said Rufus Jellicoe.

“Certainly not in the middle of a blooming economic crisis,” said Julius Crowhurst.

“Well, I’ve been saying we should get rid of him for ages,” said Edwin Horsfall.

“Oh, shut up, Horsfall,” said Crowhurst and Jellicoe in unison.

“Yes, do leave it to another time, old chap,” said Fiddler.

“The point is: who’s going to replace him?” said Jellicoe.

The four men looked at each other, eyes flashing to and fro, never settling. No-one spoke for several long seconds.

“I wonder how his wife’s taking it,” said Jellicoe, always the quickest thinker, and he trickled out of the room.

“Yes, well, I’d better see if I can help back at the office,” said Fiddler, and he walked briskly to the door – or as briskly as a man with a limp could.

“Hmm, yes, well.....I’m off,” said Crowhurst, and he, too, stomped off.

And Edwin Horsfall looked around him and realised he was alone. “Bastards,” he said, and departed, speculating on how he might out-manoeuvre the others.

The route to success on the island of *Septicaemia* in those days was to win the hearts and minds of the clan leaders. For historical reasons which need not detain us, many of the

more prominent clan leaders were women, although most of the politicians and bureaucrats were men. Three current clan queens were thought particularly influential. The first to receive a call was Queen Catherine.

“Your Highness, you have heard the news?” asked Rufus Jellicoe.

“Of course,” said the queen, “Rattlemouse notified the Council first, naturally.”

“Naturally, naturally. I’m so glad he was able at least to fulfil the common courtesies.”

The queen said nothing. She was far above the common courtesies.

“You will understand, Your Magnificence, that I came straight to seek your views on the way forward. Your clarity of vision, unsullied by petty concerns, is legendary. I believe that instant action is necessary to avert a crisis, especially in my field – public order. It is imperative at this time that a steady hand must be at the tiller, a hand which allows itself to be guided by the best and brightest of the Council.”

Jellicoe sat back and waited. He was confident that even this dull-witted woman could pick up his hint.

“Yes, I see your point,” said Catherine, lying back on her chaise longue. “I shall have to meditate upon this.”

Oh, balls!

“Of course, Your Brilliance. Your ability to meditate thoroughly, comprehensively and yet swiftly is famed throughout *Septicaemia*.”

“Yes, quite. Leave me now,” said the Queen, languidly stretching out her hand to be kissed.

“My mistress,” chimed a maid-in-waiting from the doorway as Rufus Jellicoe slobbered over Queen Catherine’s ring finger, “The Honourable Merlin Fiddler is without.”

Unlike many of you, Queen Catherine did not even think of the obvious rejoinder.

“Please send him away, with all appropriate regrets,” said the queen. “I need to be alone.”

And so Merlin Fiddler did not get to see Queen Catherine on this day. Moreover, Rufus Jellicoe ensured Fiddler spotted him leaving the Queen’s apartments, wearing an indecently broad grin.

Meanwhile, Julius Crowhurst had headed in a different direction. He desired an early audience with Queen Helena. Frustrated by the sedate pace of his trusty old mule, Featherbrain, he arrived at her palace at last. He found the queen on her throne of burnished yellow, surrounded by simpering sycophants.

“Ah, Chancellor Crowhurst,” said Queen Helena, acknowledging his presence when, bowing, his grunt of pain from his arthritic spine rent the air, “I was expecting you.”

“Your Munificence,” said Crowhurst, “I wonder if we might have a few minutes alone.”

“How intriguing,” said the queen, dismissing her entourage with a lazy wave, “What could it be that you wish to discuss? What might bring the mighty Chancellor of *Septicaemia* out to see little old me, when so many important economic questions must be occupying his mind?”

“You’ve heard, then?” said Crowhurst, who had been a farmer once and despised frivolous guessing games.

“Of course. I hear everything. Surely you know that.” The queen’s complacent smirk lit up the room, which was already pretty bright, yellow predominating.

“I never doubted it, Your Omniscience. The proper question, then, is what is to be done? It seems to me that a long drawn-out succession would be a disaster, especially for the economy. Have you, er, have you had any thoughts regarding who should take over? As you

know, my responsibility is the public finances and I do not want any vacillation. A strong leader is needed; one who would put the economy first. Your view is vital, with your deep and extensive knowledge of the calibre of the potential candidates, and the beneficent influence you are in a position to exert, with all your connections and, ah, admirers.”

“Finished?” Queen Helena had been combing her banana blond hair during Crowhurst’s peroration, but intervened when he paused for breath.

“Umm.....yes. Yes, I think so, depending upon your response.”

“Yes, well, I’m perfectly aware of your ambitions, Chancellor. And there’s a lot to be said in support of a smooth transition. Unfortunately, there’s a lot to be said in favour of one or two others. Others whom I expect to be seeing shortly.” She stopped at this point to acknowledge a signal from a courtier at the door. “Very shortly, it appears. Now, Chancellor, frankly I have no fixed views on who I want to see replacing Rattlemouse. As you say so kindly, I am not without a certain amount of influence. So, the question is quite simple: what’s in it for me?”

Drawing a veil over this sordid scene, we shall follow for the nonce the trail of Merlin Fiddler. As we have already seen, Fiddler was beaten to the court of Queen Catherine by Rufus Jellicoe. This was not just because of Fiddler’s gammy leg. Fiddler had stopped on the way.

Queen Amelia, inexperienced as she was, did not carry a great deal of weight personally, but Fiddler was bright enough to recognise her potential as the leader of the most populous clan. Calculating that he could cover his base there and still get on quickly to the more established queens, Fiddler went straight to wait on Queen Amelia.

He came upon her tending her garden.

“Ah, Your Majesty,” Fiddler barked, for he had a voice like a sea lion.

“Oh, blimey. You made me jump. How are you doing, Mr Fiddler?”

“You haven’t heard, then?”

“Heard what, dear? Oh, come indoors and have a cup of tea and tell me all about it.”

“Er, well, thanks, nothing I’d like more, but the thing is,” Fiddler ostentatiously pulled his antique hunter watch from his antique waistcoat pocket. “Yes, you see, I have an appointment, elsewhere that is, and.....”

“All right, Ducks. Keep your hair on. I won’t hold you up. But why did you come round in the first place?”

“Ah, well, I wanted to make sure you had heard the news – about Ambrose Rattlemouse.”

“Rattlemouse? What’s he done now? Set fire to his trousers with his pipe?”

“No. Were you not at yesterday’s Council meeting?”

“No. I didn’t even know it was on. Why?”

“He’s resigned.”

“Resigned?”

“Yes. Or at least he’s announced he’s going to.”

“Well, I never.....good. All right, then. What now? Are you standing?”

“Good lord, no. I mean, should anyone suggest it, but I really haven’t considered it, although now you come to mention it, what are the alternatives? Mmmm, I shall have to think quite seriously. After all, we don’t want Crowhurst or Jellicoe, do we? They’d be a calamity.” And here Fiddler ceased wittering and gave Queen Amelia a searching look.

“Abso-blooming-lutely,” the queen agreed. “I think you should certainly go in for it. You’re much cleverer than those two and you’ve always stayed close to the party’s principles. Everybody knows Rattlemouse was hiding your light under a bushel in the

Ministry of Work. Anyway, it may have back-fired on him, because you're very well known and liked here, even if some people do think you're a snob."

"Er, ah, yes. I see. But, even so, and if I did decide to allow my name to go forward, you would support me, would you?"

"Yes. I can't see why not," said Queen Amelia, with only the merest hesitation. And before she could reserve her position, Merlin Fiddler had gathered himself up and quit the scene.

A little while later Edwin Horsfall came to call on Queen Amelia. He had not been having a good day. It had taken him a couple of hours with his advisers to decide to canvass the queens and then where to start. It was at the insistence of his youngest lieutenant that he went first to his own home ground to visit Amelia, an old comrade in arms.

Horsfall had to hunt for Amelia. She was not a queen who liked to sit still for long. Eventually, he flushed her out at a local inn, refereeing a wrestling bout. Edwin's entrance was conspicuous: several of his old muckers recognised him, despite the dignified attire of a parliamentarian. Horsfall bought the lads a few drinks while the wrestlers bashed and hugged each other into oblivion.

"Wotcher, Edwin," said Queen Amelia as Horsfall helped her climb out of the ring. "Have you heard about Rattlemouse?"

"Yes, yes. That's why I came to see you," Horsfall hissed confidentially.

"Pardon?"

"Look, come and have a word outside," said Horsfall, as hopeful drinkers with hastily drained glasses pressed around them.

With Queen Amelia safely to himself under the sheltering branches of an ancient sycamore, Edwin Horsfall laid out his strategy.

“I see,” said the queen at length. “You want me to campaign for you as party leader.”

“Yes, well, I think this is the time, don’t you? Never before has our class been in such a strong position to push for power. You and I, working together, could make a formidable team. We could mobilise the people and start to make real changes.”

Queen Amelia was silent.

“Well? What do you think?” Horsfall prodded.

“Yes, well, I see what you mean. But don’t you think your lack of ministerial experience will cause a problem?”

“No, I don’t think so. I have been party chairman for a while, remember. That can only help getting the support of the rank-and-file.”

“Yes – yes, I suppose so. But.....”

“But what?”

“Well, I did more or less promise to support Merlin Fiddler a little while ago.”

“What? That dilettante? That intellectual snob? That.....that.....?”

“Yes, that. Well, I didn’t suspect you’d be going for it. And he’s much better known than you. And, well, to be honest.....”

“Well? Go on,” said a dejected Horsfall.

“Well, Ducks, you don’t look very appealing, do you? I know that shouldn’t matter, but.....”

“Harrumph!” said Horsfall, utterly deflated and unable to summon up a more biting epithet. Tucking in his fourth chin, he turned on his heel, and walked into the sycamore, causing his already bulbous nose to squash and turn a bright puce.

After that first round, leaving Julius Crowhurst trapped in a secret deal, Rufus Jellicoe feeling smug, Merlin Fiddler with a stiff leg, and Edwin Horsfall with a nasal haemorrhage, campaigning settled down to a period of fraternal back-stabbings, internecine machinations and incestuous intrigues. In short, the stuff of party politics, too tedious to detail here.

Each of the four who had thrown their hats into the ring (although, to be scrupulously accurate, Rufus Jellicoe had had to borrow a hat from his campaign manager, his cranium being too big to fit any of the standard sizes available on *Septicaemia*) obtained enough nominations to proceed. Public meetings were arranged and then generally cancelled through lack of interest. Leaflets were printed and then dumped into ditches by uninspired party members. Doors were knocked upon and, as often as they were answered, slammed in the canvassers' faces. And the four nominees continued to circle the three queens.

Queen Amelia, who had the most subjects but the least authority, kept dithering between Fiddler and Horsfall. She even considered Crowhurst at one stage, but his speech to the Council put her off when, currying favour with the other members, he proposed a wage cut for all peasants and lower ranks.

Rufus Jellicoe appeared to be surging ahead in the middle of the campaign, picking up support from both Catherine's and Helena's camps. Helena herself was not convinced, however. She was not keen to have a prime minister who was possibly cleverer than her.

Catherine, meanwhile, was flirting with Merlin Fiddler. She was attracted by his intellect, his high ideals, and his floppy hair.

And all the while, Julius Crowhurst steadily plodded on, wheeling and dealing, bobbing and weaving – but not ducking and diving; his back would not permit it.

One day, perhaps a week before the election, Julius Crowhurst arrived to pay court to Queen Amelia. But he was not alone. He had arrived mob-handed. Well, there were two

others with him, but it was the identity of the others which was the significant aspect. One was Reynard Ugley, Rufus Jellicoe's right-hand man; the other was Jeremiah Juggins, Merlin Fiddler's confederate. When united in combat against opposing parties, they were known as hatchet-men *par excellence*. They approached Amelia, for once on her throne, in full pomp: Crowhurst in the centre, Ugley to his right and Juggins to his left. She felt like a wandering ewe, facing a collie at each turn.

"Your Majesty," Crowhurst opened after the merest nod of his head, "We must address you most seriously."

"Seriously," Ugley confirmed.

"Most seriously," added Juggins.

"Well, if it's serious, you'd better get on with it, dear," said the queen, unimpressed.

"Eh? Oh, right. You see, we have it on good authority...."

"Good authority," said Ugley.

"Excellent authority," agreed Juggins.

"That you are considering throwing your weight behind Edwin Horsfall," Crowhurst continued, his brows settling into a stern frown. "We have come to warn you that such a move would be severely frowned upon."

"It already is, apparently," said Amelia.

"I'm sorry?"

"Oh, no need to apologise, cocky. I thank you for the information. Is there anything else?"

"What? I mean, just this: may we have your assurance that you will not be supporting Horsfall? You must understand, he is entirely unsound. He has no chance of succeeding in any case, but we are united in our view that even a sizeable minority voting for him would give off very dangerous signals. As you know, I have the committed support of the leadership

of most of the tradesmen's guilds, and it is essential that their membership is not encouraged to split at this unsettled time. May we have your word?"

"Certainly – bugger off! Oh dear, that's two words, isn't it? Never mind. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need some fresh air." And Amelia stood. Crowhurst and his cohorts knew enough protocol not to argue with a standing queen, and they stepped back to clear her path.

Election day dawned. Queen Amelia arrived in her throne room to find a hubbub.

"Your Majesty, it must be a conspiracy," cried one courtier.

"All the roads are blocked by gangs of thugs," called out another.

"And half our delegates are in a drunken stupor," said a third. "They were at a binge last night, paid for by Queen Helena's people."

And so on.

The queen and her lieutenants put their considerable organisational skills to good use but by the time they got their delegation to the People's Party congress, it was too late. They arrived to hear the announcement of the result. Edwin Horsfall had been eliminated in the first round; Rufus Jellicoe in the second. In a close run finish, Julius Crowhurst had nipped ahead of Merlin Fiddler to secure the party leadership.

The following day, Queen Amelia arrived at Queen Helena's palace, accepting her invitation to discuss 'these shameful events' and to decide what to do. Amelia was grateful to be invited. Even though she suspected Helena's motives, she knew she needed the help of one thoroughly versed in *Septicaemia's* institutions and their ways.

"Yes, my dear, I do so agree," Queen Helena was saying, "Something certainly ought to be done about it. But, of course, it won't. Do have another cup of tea."

"Yes, thank you, but how do you mean, 'it won't'? Surely we can do something?"

“Oh, you misunderstand me. By all means, we *could* do something. But we won’t.”

“Won’t?”

“No, that’s right. At least, *I* won’t, and you won’t be able to.”

“Look, I really don’t understand what you’re on about, but it’s time I.....” Amelia tried to get to her feet, but two things stopped her. She suddenly felt incredibly woozy; and a pair of strong hands appeared from behind her, pressing down on her shoulders.

“Ah, have you met Gertrude Chilblain? She’s the new leader of the opposition. Yes, I engineered that, too. I don’t think Julius Crowhurst will be up to holding her off for long. Of course, Edwin Horsfall might have been a different proposition, or even Merlin.....I say, are you all right, dear? I suppose it was quite a strong dose. Ah, well, never mind. Gertrude will ensure they don’t find you. Now, as I was saying.....”

As Amelia slipped into unconsciousness, most of her people were calming down and returning to their routines, disappointed but resigned.

But in a dark corner of a dark barn in a dark wood, a little band of angry young peasants was meeting. And they had a printing press.

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