

A Paraffin Oil Table Lamp

by Pat Watson (© Copyright)

“Please to help me Herr Mister,” my bicycle she is punctured. Willie Killian was mesmerised. During the war forty-year-old west of Ireland farmer’s sons seldom met film-star types in distress while cycling to town. In her little saddlebag she had a full repair kit including two little tyre levers. Willie had always used spoons to remove tyres. The levers were much better, even if he was a bit addled by the strange fragrance. Perfume was rare in the west. She was talkative with the face and gait of a young girl; the body of a woman and a neck just like his mother. Judging by her hair she was a dab hand with the rack (comb). By the time the bicycle was back on its wheels he was enchanted.

She had just arrived to Ireland to escape the war. She was renting Carter’s vacant house just here. She had lost everything, including her family. “Would he like some tea? The kettle was on the boil”. He stood in the sitting room holding his cap in his hand while she talked from the kitchen. “You to join me on the chaise longue” she said as she placed the tray on a little table. He had been looking at the sofa with only one end. “So

that's what's it's called!" She sat on the reclining end while he gingerly sat on the other end. The tray had two cups and a plate with two little long loaves, split down the middle with sausages in the centre. Frankfurters, she called them. They were like rubber sausages, took a lot of chewing. He was on his way to town to buy the makings of a new suit. She would go with him.

As they cycled he forgot Mary, with her farm and her aging parents. For years she had been his best hope as his older brother was the heir apparent to the home farm. Not that he had got any farther than thinking of Mary but this foreign lady stirred his fancy in a way totally new to him. She had said her name was Brigitte. He supposed that was a mispronounced Bridget. Sure Bridget was his mother's name. The parish church was St Bridget's; they even had a St Bridget's holy well. Was it a sign?

They parked their bicycles in the alley between the draper and the hardware shop. Isn't zat lamp ze most beautiful lamp you ever saw!" she said, looking in the window. "It would ve just perfect on my sitting room table! No? Ve had one just like it before ve lost everything. It would make life in this strange country just like ze Fatherland, but of course I can never have it, I am too poor now." She whimpered. As he looked at her sad face,

she flashed her very long eyelashes. He never saw eyelashes that long before. The poor girl was distraught. The lamp was thirty-seven shillings and six pence. He had fifty shillings for the makings of the suit. If he bought her the lamp it would make her happy, she would smile again, it would make her forget her troubles and her loneliness, she would be very pleased and grateful, maybe very, very grateful. To hell with the suit, he would buy her the lamp.

They packed it in a wooden box, filling the inside of the globe with newspaper and packing the whole thing in fine sawdust. They even included a bottle of paraffin oil for fuel. Wasn't he the proud man cycling home with the luxury lamp on the carrier and the beautiful lady beside him. He wouldn't call the Queen his aunt. It didn't bother him that she spoke friendly to an army fellow.

He unpacked the lamp, placed it on the table and when he fitted the globe it was magnificent. "Vell Herr Villy Villian you are vonderful" she said and throwing out her arms, she caught him by the ears and kissed him lightly on the lips. His heart went mad. He was transfixed with a hideous grin. He had never been kissed before. "Thank you velly, velly much Herr Villy," she said as she ushered him out the door. "You must visit again but

now I have some letters to write” He jumped on the bike, emitting little yahoo’s; sure he nearly did himself an injury jumping on the saddle. Night had fallen but with light in his heart he scarcely noticed. He could still feel where her lips met his. He could still smell the perfume. His ears would never be the same again. He pulled up suddenly. A thought had just struck him. Why did she usher him out? Had she expected him to respond to the kiss? Maybe she was disappointed. He should have guzzled her. “You’re a fool,” he told himself. “You waited a lifetime for this and now you’re cycling away when you should be making hay” He turned back. He would return and take up where they left off. He was sure that’s what she wanted. What excuse would he give for coming back?

The box! He would say he wanted the box for a clucking hen, to set a clutch of eggs for hatching, that sounded plausible”. Anyhow she would probably fly into his arms and words would be superfluous. After that he could play it by ear. He was very excited. Wasn’t this his lucky day? “It’s night you idiot, day or night what matter? Go man go”

When he got to her house the blind was pulled and there was a man’s bicycle outside. He went down on one knee and peeped in under the blind. Bridget was reclining in the chaise longue. The army fellow was

reclining with her. He had his head left on her chest looking up at her. She was holding a frankfurter in her mouth and he was trying to bite it. He couldn't because she was holding his ears. He rapped on the door. She opened it. He brushed past her, took the lamp in both hands and walked out, his anger carrying him on. "But Herr Villy ve vill have no light!" "Ye won't need light for what you're at!" Writing letters, "my foot!" to whom? Wasn't all belonging to her dead? "Moryagh" She was probably a German spy. She was using her sausage to get information out of the army fellow. He hoped she'd get caught. They might even shoot her. She would roast in hell. It would be the price of her for meddling with the makings of a man's suit.

Half a mile down the road he came to Mary's house. He marched up the path still holding the lighted lamp. Mary looked out the window. "Daddy! There's an apparition coming up the garden" The father looked out. "Come Nancy," he said to his wife, "Out the back door, this is a man on a mission, leave him to Mary". Mary opened the door. Willie marched in and put the lamp on the table. Mary held out her arms in awe. Before she could catch his ears her bear hugged her. She was agreeably surprised. She had been a little concerned about his masculinity, she need not have worried, he was all man. Even the old couple peeping in the window squeezed hands.

Did they all live happily ever after? Why wouldn't they? Hadn't they the best-lit parlour in the parish.