

Il Messaggero
Saturday, 6th January 1962

The Christmas Crab Quadrille **by Milton Gendel**

The snow lay all around the 18th-century house called Tifton, and from the French windows of the ground floor there was a white dazzle bounded only on the horizon by the black line of a forest of firs. A clock was striking eight when Anne Trimble wiggled violently across the threshold of the gold and white drawing room and in a series of intricate little heaves proceeded toward the fireplace, where her father, Lord Tifton was sitting hunched over a newspaper. Without looking up he muttered, "For God's sake, Anne, will you turn off that blasted machine."

Anne's wiggling stopped but one hip was still shot forward and the corresponding arm, first clenched, stuck straight out from the elbow, while the other arm clutched a radio to her breast. An antenna projected up from the box and wavered around her ear. A gravelly voice from the radio syncopated the words: "Twist, twist, twist again, oh twist, twist, twist again".

"Turn that thing off, Anne!", said Lord Tifton.

Anne's body slumped dejectedly and a listless hand turned the off knob. "Oh Daddy, it's my Christmas present from Gogo. Sent from New York. It's the biggest transistor radio they make."

He folded the paper and put it under his arm, saying loudly to himself: "Not getting enough coverage on the Common Market". An amazed expression appeared on his face as he focused on the figure of his daughter. Very pretty at seventeen, with a beehive of blond hair, she was wearing a tight pink blouse, tighter blue jeans and high heeled black leather boots inlaid in a red and blue diamond pattern.

"Good Lord, Anne where did you got these appalling boots?"

"But Daddy, they're authentic cowboy boots, from Texas."

"Anne, you can't go about in that ridiculous fancy dress."

"But Elizabeth Taylor wears cowboy boots in London, so why can't I in the country? Besides, Mummy doesn't mind."

Something flashed past the windows with a roar and the snow on the terrace was marked with two sets of parallel black lines.

"What on earth was that", said Lord Tifton.

"Must be going forty an hour."

"Oh they can do fifty."

One of the windows opened and two small boys, aged six and five, their blue snow suits and white crash helmets covered with snow, rushed into the room, leaving wet tracks on the Aubusson carpet.

“Daddy, David forced me into a snowbank”, said the younger.

“Daddy, I went forty”.

Lord Tifton made for the door. “Where’s their nurse,” he said. “Anne, find Nanny, will you. Think I’ll have some breakfast. Anyone else down?”

“Yes Daddy, I will. No, no one’s come down yet.”

In the dining room, which was hung with Dutch paintings of food displays, Lord Tifton cheerfully shouted “G’ mornin’ Pluto” to a fat Labrador that was lying by a mahogany sideboard. The dog thumbed his tail in acknowledgment without bothering to lift his head. Lord Tifton helped himself to kidneys eggs and ham from chafing dishes on the sideboard, settled himself at the table, unfolded his newspaper and propped it against a coffee urn. Gogo Benson, the American professor of marine biology who was spending Christmas at Tifton, came in.

“Good morning Henry”, he said to Lord Tifton, who replied “Umm”, without interrupting his reading. While Benson was serving himself, one of the other guests, the Duke of Wessex, shuffled into the room and said, “G’ mornin’ old boy”, to the Labrador.

When they were seated, Benson said to the Duke, “It’s a fine morning for shooting”. The Duke nodded perfunctorily and then raised the barricade of his newspaper. After a silence, Benson addressed the backs of the two newspapers: “What do you think of England’s joining the Common Market?”

The barricades rustled. The Duke replied, “Against it”. Lord Tifton shouted, “For it”. Then he said to the Duke, “Steel’s up. Congratulations”. The Duke said, “Umm. Glad we bought back from the Government after we got you fellows out. Nothing much on. Think I’ll have a week in Jamaica”. Lord Tifton said, “Join you if my pair will come”.

“I guess I’ll go and see Caroline now”, said Benson. The papers came down and two cordial faces beamed at him. “Dear Gogo”, said Lord Tifton. “Shooting’s at ten.” “See you later, my dear fellow”, said the Duke quite distinctly.

Upstairs in her bedroom Lady Tifton, a more mature replica of her daughter, was propped up in bed with a tray on her knees. The breakfast things had been pushed aside and in the middle of the tray lay a large shrimp cut open and pinned out on a board. With a pair of forceps Lady Tifton was delicately extracting something from the shrimp’s insides. “Just a sec”, she said. “Did you see anyone at breakfast?”

“Yes, Henry and the Duke”, said Benson. “English men say good morning only to dogs. And what does ‘pair’ mean?”

“Oh, Henry as you know is a Labour M.P., and is paired with a Conservative, meaning that if they both agree not to turn up neither of their parties is the loser.”

Benson said, “Listen, I should have told you, the shrimp’s eggs haven’t arrived from the lab in Oxford, so it’s useless to remove the seminal vesicles”.

“Oh no! How irritating; and it’s my last shrimp.” With a despairing gesture she indicated a large aquarium in the window embrasure. An aerator bubbled in the tank, which appeared to be empty

except for a clump of seaweed and a dead fish lying in one corner. Benson said, "Might as well get rid of that dead fish".

"No", said Lady Tifton. "It's food." The clump of seaweed was moving slowly across the tank toward the fish. It got there and suddenly a smooth and shiny red claw emerged from the disorderly bundle of weeds and began scissoring away at the fish's belly.

"Wonderful camouflages that crab carries on its back", said Lady Tifton. "Now, what am I to do with these things until the eggs arrive?"

"Keep them in a warm saline solution."

"Right", said Lady Tifton. "A plastic bag is the thing. I can have it tied under my arm while we're out shooting."

David and Sam were swinging on a trapeze that had been hung in the hall at the foot of the stairs. As it flew up their feet pointed at the face of a portrait by Gainsborough of a former Tifton, and when it swung back their heads almost touched a Canaletto of Tifton Castle and its surrounding landscape. When Sam saw his mother and professor Benson come downstairs he leaped off the trapeze, seized a small packet lying under the Christmas tree in the hall and rushed to hand it to Benson. He said, "I didn't know you were going to give me a present yesterday so I didn't have one for you".

On the package was written, "Merry Christmas, with love from Sam to the transatlantic Marine Monster".

Lady Tifton laughed. "No, Sam. You should say Professor Benson."

"Well, you told me not to call him Gogo and I didn't know his other name."

Sometime later Anne drove off in a Mini Minor with the two boys, and a Rolls Royce with Lady Tifton at the wheel bore Professor Benson and the others toward the fields where they were to shoot. As they went through a village red-jacketed riders in full hunting rig ambled out from the diminutive stable yards of toy-size cottages. Others from the village, in ordinary clothes, were setting off in cars. As the Rolls got into the country again Benson could see that the other cars were heading for a rise in the midst of a plain, where they parked at the side of the road.

"Hill topping", Lady Tifton explained. "That's where Anne and the boys were off to. The whole neighborhood follows the hunt by driving from one hill top to another."

When they reached their destination, some fields lying between the wooded slopes, the Duke, looking gray and mossy in his old tweeds, settled himself on a shooting stick with a dog and a loader beside him. Lord Tifton was dressed in a sort of apache costume, which included a cloth cap down under the ears, a black velvet jacket and a red bandana around the neck. He went towards the other guns in the neighboring fields, with an assortment of dogs at his heels – a beagle, a German police dog, a black poodle, an Airedale and a mongrel. Professor Benson stationed himself at a distance between the two men and behind them Lady Tifton wandered around, accompanied by a miniature dachshund. The first pheasant flew high out of the copse in the direction of the Duke. Benson watched him lounging on his shooting stick, evidently unaware of the bird flying toward him.

“I suppose he’s almost gaga”, Benson thought. “he’s old and uncoordinated.”

The pheasant was directly overhead when the Duke, apparently not even sighting, in a single swift movement raised his gun and fired. Lady Tifton shouted to her dachshund, “Galen, get it!” The small dog reached the pheasant as it fell fifty yards from the Duke an instant before the large dogs officially responsible for retrieving it, and fended them off with furious snarls while tearing masses of feathers from the bird’s breast.

Lady Tifton said to Benson, “Galen adores shooting, but the beaters loathe him. He spoils all the birds”.

Benson was ecstatic over the galvanization of the Duke he had just witnessed. “It’s wonderful. That shambling, supposedly oblivious old man. It was just like the camouflaged crab in your aquarium. Like the scissoring red claw, that arm shooting out of the gray old bundle was as efficient as a shiny precision instrument.”

“Oh, the Duke”, said Lady Tifton vaguely. “He is a good shot, but then he’s been at it for ages.”