

## The Woman Without a Name

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I was cycling to work one blustery morning in April; I'd left the eastern river bridge approach and was going down the bank towards the canal. There's an acre or two of wasteland there that gets flooded in winter: although surrounded by graceful willows it's rather derelict and rubbish-strewn; you would be stretching facts to call it a meadow. This piece of land is used as an informal showground by small, usually second-rate outfits, dog-and-pony shows and the like. However, that morning there were a few caravans and a large, ornate sign on a scaffold that read:

### **MACMILLAN'S CIRCUS**

The next day there were more caravans, and the grimy canvas big-top was being put up. Bunting was being strung between poles. A noisy generator was being primed. Amidst all this there was the sound of someone skilfully practising the trumpet: the sheer virtuosity of the playing — beguiling and slightly impudent — made your pulse quicken. You would recognize the style anywhere.

Now, Macmillan's is more or less an equestrian show with a number of vaudeville acts between the horse-riding: it's quite witty. It's easily the best of the small shows that come to town: some of the vaudeville is intelligent and often caustically funny. When Macmillan's is here I invariably go to see it. There's a girl horse-rider and trumpeter who is one of the star attractions: she's billed as the glamorous Zaza, though her real name is The Honourable Louisa Winterton: I asked the woman in the ticket office when I bought a signed photograph. I'm surprised she told me her real name: you'd think that artistes would wish to keep the mystique of the ring. "No," said the ticket-seller, "Zaza likes her real name; she's an educated woman and comes from a noble family, and they completely accept her vocation. You often see her father, the viscount, in the tiers."

So when Macmillan's is in town I go every night, and stand at what might have been called a stage-door (were Macmillan's tent a thing of bricks and mortar) but I've never succeeded in intercepting the glamorous Zaza yet, even though I've sent her flowers on a number of occasions.

And so, a solitary man amongst a host of families, I sat that night on the tier nearest the ring in the smell of horse, sawdust and canvas: an exhilarating and expectant smell. The show starts. Macmillan strides into the ring to a burst of excited trumpet music. This trumpet music has something of the flavour of the end of Shostakovich's first piano concerto. The trumpeter is no less than Zaza herself, dressed in her rider's outfit, a deep scarlet body-stocking, unsequined, with a tiny tutu, black pumps and a black velvet sash. I watch in fascination her fingers going over the piston-valves. And the concentration on her face. The way she turns the instrument as she plays! Oh, Louisa, or Zaza, as you seem to want to call yourself!

Apart from Macmillan, most of the performers are women. There's Zaza, of course, doing her remarkable feats on an amiable piebald which acquiesces to her every command: Zaza, loose in knee and hip, her head perfectly level, her arms outstretched, her perfect figure a marvel of anatomy as she circles the piste: or balanced on a single knee, her other leg straight behind her. Then there is Granda, the strong-woman who catches a cannonball fired from a real cannon: how the smell of black powder smoke

fills the ring! Then there is *Ajaxa the Incredible and Mandy* in which Mandy is sawn in half by the cross-dressed Ajaxa and miraculously rejoins herself. Ajaxa is an expert on the musical saw, and regales us with saw-music, accompanied by an anonymous man playing the drums and by Zaza herself. Ajaxa will select a little girl from the audience, sit her on her knee and quickly teach her how to play a 40`` rip-saw with plenty of vibrato.

Ajaxa dismisses the little girl and raises her hand. "So you thought that you were safe. Many people think that they are safe. But imagine. Just imagine." While she says this she removes her bowler hat and throws it to an unseen pair of hands, as she does her tail-coat. She puts on a fur coat and a fur hat. "Feel cold? Oh, it's cold." The lights dip to an arctic night complete with Northern Lights. A mist rises from the floor. "Oh, yes, how it's cold." Ajaxa, standing in the cold, bluish light of the follow-spot, stares round the tiers with her strange, hypnotic eyes. "Snow. In some deep part of Russia. You don't know it, but you are taking a message from the King of Bavaria to the Czar and Czarina. Your route is roundabout to avoid attracting attention. Where the village is, you do not know. Endless snow, and the road to the staging-post in the next village is wiped out.' She moves her crossed hands, flat, one above another: a pass that means certain extinction: 'Oh, the hunger! Oh, the storm! Oh, the stress! And the horses in your troika are coming to the end of their reserves, brave animals that they are! And then you hear the last sound in the world you ever wanted to hear: the sound of a hungry wolf-pack: they are on your trail—the wolf leader has your scent— Oh, he summons the others to him! They are closing in!" And then an extraordinary sound: a high-pitched howling, animal and intense! Ajaxa has moved to a screened enclosure. "The others follow," Ajaxa says. "Imagine: and listen. Listen and imagine." And then there comes the terrible sound of a winter wolf-pack, hungry and unappeasable. A few children in the tiers scream. "But the sound dies away. The wolf-pack has seen and follows some other prey. Another creature — anonymous to you — a deer, perhaps — is running for its life: and that unknown life will be taken in your stead. You live only because of another's suffering. You chance to live another day by another's death." The unearthly sound dies away. Then the curtain drops: you see a battery of saws, the tension worked by Ajaxa, the handles of two saws in each hand, and her left foot on another. Mandy and the anonymous man were bowing with 'cello-bows in each hand the outer edges of the saws. There's silence. Silence continues. Then Ajaxa speaks. "*O fortunati!* So it was an illusion. Was it not? Ha ha! *O fortunati!* What is not illusion?" She stares round the tiers with her hypnotic eyes. Her female voice drops to an unfeminine bass. "And so we're safe beneath the canvas. And canvas keeps out everything the elements can throw at us. Or does it? Anyway, you're altogether safe beneath the canvas of your beliefs. Perhaps. In the end it doesn't matter. Every politician and every beguiler asks: *Trust Me*. Not I. I say: Be entertained: and learn. That's all I ask." Ajaxa laughs, somewhat darkly, removes her fur hat and coat, throws them to an unseen pair of hands, retrieves her tail coat, bowler and glossy-black baton.

Ajaxa, Mandy and the anonymous man bow deeply, and withdraw to great applause. Ajaxa sweeps her dangerous gaze round the tiers at the moment of her going.

Then we see more equestrienne and musical feats from the glamorous Zaza on her piebald.

And then there was an act I had never seen before.

Let me describe it in some detail.

Macmillan hands over the show to what is apparently a comic MC with saturnine face make-up, dressed in white with a white top-hat set at a rakish angle and white gloves. He looks strangely like Ajaxa (and he holds an identical glossy-black baton) but

his behaviour is altogether different.

The MC asks the audience to stand. His manner is commanding. He holds out his arms as if imploring the audience's confidence.

The audience stands: those actors who are in the ring stand also.

The MC asks for a volunteer: a young lady from the tiers. 'But I must have the right one! Only the right girl will do for me! As in the comet of my brief life, so, fleetingly, here tonight in the close confidence of the ring!'

There is silence.

'Tonight I am going to teach a graceful young lady to ride a horse with delicacy and finesse!' announces the MC. 'Which fortunate young lady shall it be? You ladies volunteer and I choose. *Le droit du seigneur.*'

The glamorous Zaza stands beside and behind him, smiling radiantly and holding the reins of the piebald.

Then there is the witty performance of choosing a young lady from the many who wish to learn to ride. 'No, I cannot teach a young lady to ride when she's wearing trousers: I need to see the action of the legs. No, I can't teach a young lady with short legs to ride: I need a young lady with very long legs and a short skirt. I'll find the right one. Trust Me. Trust!' His voice is Ajaxa's, at once beguiling and commanding. His eyes are Ajaxa's eyes, subtly suggestive. He has her intense gaze.

Eventually the young lady is found. Allow me to describe her. She is perhaps twenty-two, twenty-three, six foot tall with fantastically long good-looking legs. She wears a freckled dress short in the skirts. She has a somewhat Slavic face and short bobbed black hair. For all her height she looks quiet and demure.

She stands next to the MC, who holds her hand. She looks round shyly and smiles nervously, her manner diffident. The MC — it must be Ajaxa — playfully teases her about her love-life, assures her that, once she has learned the art of riding she won't want for wealthy suitors and confides to her that she'll never regret the day she gave her trust.

Now, I thought this was going to be serious if brief tuition. It seemed so. The young lady was fitted with a safety-belt attached to a wire depending from a pulley in the woodwork aloft. Two ring-hands held a handle on the other end of the wire. The amiable piebald was drawn up. Buffonello the auguste clown knelt on all fours (a human mounting-block) beside the amiable piebald. The young lady was induced to stand on Buffonello's back. Then she threw her fantastically long right leg over the amiable piebald.

And then it all took a turn for the worse.

Buffonello collapsed with a shout and the young lady, half-mounted, hung on for dear life. Then the MC soundly slapped the amiable piebald's rump. The amiable piebald began to trot briskly round the ring: the young lady, thoroughly confused, not knowing what to do, held on as best she could.

Well, if you have never been taught to ride you cannot be expected to understand the subtle gait of a quite fast-moving horse, and it is not natural to sit astride it, stirrupless, and move with the animal's motion. So the poor young woman, not knowing what to do, pushed her face into the amiable piebald's mane and knelt in an irregular and gawky posture on the creature's back. Of course, this meant that her skirt rode up, revealing her long thighs and the cheeks of her buttocks, while the amiable piebald carried this exhibit methodically round the ring several times for the delectation of all onlookers. And the applause was intense and prolonged, with jeering laughter, noisy cat-calls and whistles. And the young lady was powerless to help herself.

It was a cruel act. An innocent young woman had been publicly humiliated, and I

didn't like it. The humiliation was compounded by a shout of *Brava!* and a fine display of smiling horsemanship by the glamorous Zaza on a handsome dapple-grey while the humiliated girl, walking to the exit, smoothed her skirts and generally recovered her equanimity. You could see that she was nearly in tears.

*[This is a preview. The full text is approximately 6,000 words.]*