

Ajaxa

David Wheldon

Just outside my town — to the North — there's an elaborate railway junction which has fascinated me since childhood. It's not complete any more as only one of the lines now has busy traffic. I find it interesting to look out at the grassy cuttings of the disused chords. However, in my recent journey, my train slowed as it took one of the remaining tracks. I looked out at the vacant lot inside the curve of the railway where there was a grassy siding. I expected it to look as it always had; empty, weedy, with occasional litter strewn about the ground, and, in summer, fireweed, mauve rods followed by skeins of down. There had rarely been anything else: occasionally a British Railways van. But that day I saw that there were a number of wagons on the siding; one of them was a brake-van. And, standing on the platform of the brake-van was the figure of a tall, thin, elderly woman. She had long, iron-grey hair. She wore a black, ankle-length dress with a tailored bodice and she held what looked like a hair-brush in her hands. She turned towards my train, looked in at my compartment window: unerringly she caught me with her gaze. She stared into my eyes. Then she was gone.

Now, I know only one person who could have fitted that description. The train was travelling slowly, and I was able to take a good look at her. It was she. Ajaxa. What a coincidence! Now, I had never spoken to Ajaxa in my life: I had been told that she had been a housekeeper, and that she had given this up: she then performed a number of fine vaudeville routines at Macmillan's Circus.

I had no place particular to go, so, recalling the intense search of her brief gaze, I resolved to go and meet her.

There being a small, almost abandoned halt at the south end of the junction, I had a word with the guard, and, refusing a consideration, he got the driver to make an unscheduled stop.

The guard stepped onto the platform, consulted his watch, allowed me down, and then rejoined his train, which went into the distance of the cutting and the deep tunnel.

Well, I had done it now. I would never be picked up from that halt, and it would be a long, long walk back to town. I often make foolish, impulsive decisions, as did my father before me. He would have done such a silly thing with alacrity. My mother despaired of us.

The day was warm and unpleasantly humid; at the same time there was a wind which blew small dust-spirals across the waste ground. I crossed the railway and walked towards the siding.

Ajaxa was sitting on the edge of the brake-van's platform, her face in her hands, her elbows on her knees. She looked in poor health. How different from her circus days!

'Ajaxa?'

She raised her head and looked at me, her formidable stare unwavering. She had secretive, dark eyes. 'I *have* been called that. Not for a few years, though. I thought I'd lost that moniker. You must remember me from my days at Macmillan's.' This was the first time I had heard her ordinary speaking, rather than her public address, voice. It was low, its timbre pleasing, and assured.

‘I do. Not that we have ever spoken. I recognized you from the train, and knew that I had to see you.’

‘Ah. Got it. I know who you are. Innomina told me about you. I saw you with her one afternoon. She said you were a comfort to her after only a short conversation. You listened to her. Is that right?’

‘Nomma! The girl who pretended to be selected from the audience and who went through ritual humiliation every night in the ring.’

‘That’s right. A strange situation. To her, humiliation in the ring was the world in miniature.’

Ajaxa seemed pleased to see me. ‘Sit down,’ she said, drawing herself into the shade of the brake-van’s open canopy. I sat beside her.

So, although we were total strangers, we sat together in the shade in a companionable silence. Ajaxa’s very mien had the ability to put me at my ease, which surprised me: I tend to be suspicious of people until I know them well. Ajaxa smiled slightly as though she read my thought.

‘How’s the circus now?’ I asked, at length.

‘Macmillan’s? The horse-opera?’ She sighed. ‘It’s all washed up. It’s now just something in the fossil record. Television’s done for it. The imbecile’s eye.’ Her expression changed. ‘You used to come and sit in the tiers quite a lot when we were in *that* town. I recall the elaborate lamps on the balustrading of the river bridge. I remember you. You always had eyes for Zaza. What men will do for a glance over the shoulder and a beauty’s fleeting smile.’ She frowned. ‘Or the sound of a drum. Martial music. I don’t understand it.’ Ajaxa shook her head in reminiscence. ‘Oh, The Honourable Zaza Winterton, daughter of a viscount and a circus kinkeress. You were the death of your father,’ she said in a low voice, as though to herself.

‘What happened to Zaza?’

Ajaxa sighed and shook her head. She looked down at the hairbrush she was holding. She evidently took pleasure in her own long hair, iron-grey though it might have been. ‘A sad story. Yes, sad rather than tragic. Mundane and sad. You don’t want to know it. You really don’t. Let the foolish girl’s memory be one of happy, smiling agility.’

‘Tell me, Ajaxa.’

‘No,’ said Ajaxa firmly. ‘I don’t like thinking of it myself. She teased a little too far.’ Ajaxa began to brush her hair, looking at her own reflection in a shard of mirror, as though she were in a private dressing-room.

[This is a preview. The full text is some 35,000 words.]