

Opening extract from
Wig Begone

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ONE

‘Charles Courtley,’ declared the Treasurer of Galahad’s Inn, eighteen months before. ‘You are hereby called to the Bar of England and Wales.’

That was it. Finally, I had achieved my dream and become a barrister. True, it had taken me some years to pass the exams but I had made it at last! Now for the formal dinner in the grand surroundings of Hall and then the last bus home – I reckoned I had just about enough money on me for that.

Frankly, Andrea and I were still very hard up. Married for three years, we were living in a dingy basement flat in Peckham; all we could afford. Not only was it damp all the year round and freezing cold in winter but constant electrical shorts often announced themselves with a loud bang. It was also miles away from the nearest tube.

The call ceremony took place in 1972 and I was about to eat the last dinner in Hall required of me. These twelve compulsory events were regarded as being equally important to passing the exams. Nonetheless, it felt good to sit down at the high table in Hall that night as a barrister and not a student. For the first time, I wore my brand new bar robe over the pin-striped trousers and black jacket which would be my uniform from now in. The fact that these items were bought second-hand from Moss Bros. worried me not at all.

Full of good food and faintly sozzled, I caught the last bus

to Peckham. The three-quarter hour journey gave me time to reflect.

Barrister at last! It felt good but there was a problem. I had no income or indeed any expected in the foreseeable future. In fact, I was totally dependent on my darling Andrea to keep us from starving.

The following week, I was due to start a year's pupillage – a period spent with an experienced barrister during which I could expect to earn little or nothing. Indeed, during the first six months, I had no 'right of audience' before any court anyway so Andrea, who now worked as a hospice nurse (and that not a well-paid job) was required to keep me. Her wages covered the rent of our flat and basic necessities but there wasn't enough to finance anything else. My barrister's robe had been a present from my parents but how was I going to afford the wig or any of the other expenses?

By now somewhat subdued, I got off the bus and a minute later let myself into our flat. After routinely kissing both Andrea and our two cats, Katie and Winston, who were wedged either side of the bed, I crawled next to them and instantly fell asleep.

I woke up to a flash of inspiration. Despite, or perhaps because of, my hangover from the night before, I decided the answer was not, as I had been contemplating as a last resort, working as a petrol pump attendant in the evenings but to visit the bank manager without delay. At that time, loans were not so easily available but wasn't I now a professional man?

As it turned out, this middle-aged and respectable chap was prepared to give me a working overdraft in the princely sum of £300 and to celebrate, Andrea and I treated ourselves to a slap-up lunch in a fine restaurant in Dulwich. This was a classic mistake – the £50 bill punched a considerable dent in the overdraft facility at far too early a stage of my career but it was worth it.

So I didn't have to exchange a pair of jeans for my pin-

stripes each night and troop off to the local garage to work the petrol pumps. I could concentrate on pupillage and what a great experience that would prove to be!

Such affairs were arranged pretty informally in those days. A barrister acquaintance of mine told me that Rex Huggins in his chambers might be prepared to take me on as his pupil.

‘He’s got a mixed common law practice so you should see a bit of everything with him. I’ll bring him up to the pub one night for a drink.’

Rex turned out to be an affable chap in his early forties who looked every inch the successful barrister – exquisitely dressed in a dark, three-piece suit with a melodious voice to match. After we had imbibed a considerable amount of alcohol, I simply asked him if he could take me on.

‘Can’t see why not,’ replied Rex eyeing me up and down. ‘You seem the right sort of chap!’

This simple assessment would not meet approval now but what mattered most then was to be able to absorb the ethos (as well as the alcohol) of the ancient profession. That was far more important than any amount of legal training. Despite all the criticism levelled at the snobbery and elitism of the Bar at that time, it didn’t really matter about your class, school or university as long as you fitted the mould – and your pupilmaster was responsible for ensuring you did.

So the first six months of my pupillage was truly traditional. I followed Rex round the various courts, read his briefs and most importantly (or so it appeared at the time) enjoyed and shared his lifestyle. That included regular visits to Tom Tug’s wine bar in the evenings, as well as indulging in ‘reasonable lunches’, as Rex somewhat euphemistically called them. When we weren’t actually in court, he believed wholeheartedly in these, and I remember spending many enjoyable times in such establishments as Simpson’s in the Strand, Sheekey’s in Soho, and last but not least, the Cock Tavern in Fleet Street.

Then the inevitable day came when I actually met the head of chambers – a figure seen as remote as Zeus on Mount Olympus.

Rex and I had returned to his room in chambers one day in May after a leisurely ‘reasonable’ lunch. He said he intended to settle down to some paperwork, a euphemism for indulging in a pleasant snooze prior to being brought tea and biscuits by the junior clerk. Unfortunately, a slim brief now lay upon his desk which apparently caused him a moment’s apprehension. Work suddenly became a distinct and unattractive possibility. Leafing through the papers however, he laughed as he spoke.

‘Ah, a little gaming matter in which Lionel is going to lead me. Apparently this firm wants to open another casino in Piccadilly and their solicitors have instructed Lionel to make an application for a gaming licence to the Bow Street Justices next week. Con’s set down for four-thirty this afternoon.’

He tossed the brief aside and settled down in his chair for a snooze anyway. No further work was required. After all, Lionel Coggiter QC, the head of chambers was an expert in gambling law, and only needed a junior because all Queen’s Counsel were required to have one in those days. So Rex was brought in to play a pretty nominal part in the case.

In due course, Perch, the hawk-faced clerk summoned us to Lionel’s room at the front of the building looking out on the Temple lawns which on a sunny day looked very attractive. Sunshine dappled the grassy borders which neatly squared the rows of red and white roses. According to legend, it was in this very place that the Yorkists and Lancastrians had picked their respective emblems and sworn allegiance to rival Kings in the fifteenth century.

Lionel Coggiter sat in state behind his vast desk for all the world like a mediaeval potentate about to receive homage. A true Edwardian, born in 1909, he was at the height of his powers. Tall and thin, he had the ascetic look of an early Roman emperor. Every inch a patrician, he sat calmly puffing his

magnificent pipe with its distinctive silver shank. Clouds of fragrant smoke filled the somewhat stuffy room as we all trooped in.

I tensed with anticipation. Now I was about to see one of the finest legal minds in action.

The con (conference in legal parlance) began. Lionel sat peering at the plans of the interior of the proposed new casino with a large magnifying glass.

‘The bar area,’ he stated in his clipped upper-class drawl, ‘is far too near the gambling tables. The Justices won’t allow that to be sure! As you are well aware, gentlemen, they do not approve of the admixture of the social vices, as they are sometimes called – namely, the consumption of alcohol and participation in games of chance. According to my analysis of your plans, it will be just too easy for a customer to purchase a cocktail or a glass of champagne and proceed to the gaming room nearby.’

‘But surely, that’s the point, Mr Coggiter,’ the instructing solicitor, Mr. Snood replied. ‘Gambling takes place in another room altogether. You can’t even order a drink in the same area; surely that will satisfy the Justices’ objections?’

Lionel removed his rimless half-moon specs and silver-stemmed pipe at the same time. A slight arching of the eyebrows and a pursing of lips indicated that a pronouncement was imminent. This was the moment when he really earned his vast consultation fee – which I duly noted was marked on his brief at 400 guineas.

‘It will be for me to undertake that task, Mr. Snood and it is my firm opinion that this is an impropriety which could well cause the application to fail...’

Rex Huggins now spoke. I couldn’t blame him for wanting to contribute to the debate but I’m sure that later he regretted that he ever opened his mouth.

‘One suggestion might be to construct a small lobby off the bar through which you actually have to go before going into the gaming area.’

We all waited with bated breath for the great man to deliver his judgement. Personally, I thought it was an entirely sensible idea.

‘Wholly inadequate in the circumstances. A punter suitably fortified by the stimulus of alcohol would venture naturally out of the room, pausing only momentarily in the lobby on his way to gamble. As Milton puts it so well...

*Who shall tempt with wand’ring feet
the dark unbottom’d infinite abyss.*

I conclude therefore that the bar must be built much further away.’

There was simply no answer to that, and Rex did not even attempt it simply salvaging his dignity with a resigned grunt of respectful agreement. I was much impressed. The oracle had spoken (using such splendid language) and Lionel had earned every penny as the great Edwardian performer he undoubtedly was. He exhibited that sort of condescending grandness which you see so clearly when you leaf through the period’s photography, or watch the early jerky newsreels. You can picture the men dressed in frock-coats, spats and carrying canes; the women wearing elaborate gowns or dresses with their fantastic hats strolling together along the golden avenues of nostalgia. Lionel was a traditional head of chambers in that he was a complete despot. They were his chambers; he held the tenancy from the Temple and the senior clerk, Perch was more akin to a personal manservant than a booking agent for the barristers. The latter, always immaculately dressed in black jacket and striped trousers, always referred to ‘Mr. Lionel’ in a hushed tone of respect. It harked back to those days in previous centuries when barristers actually lived communally in the Inn, eating their dinners in Hall in the evening and the clerk was employed to wait on his ‘gentleman’.

Chambers life, in fact, seemed very leisurely. The rough and tumble of criminal work was regarded as being rather down-market and common and only my pupilmaster and the junior

tenants indulged in it at all. Most of the work undertaken was the drafting of civil pleadings and opinions, written by hand, between the civilised working hours of ten in the morning and five in the evening. There were applications before Masters in the High Court, of course, made conveniently 'over the road' in the Strand. That entailed a visit to the 'Bear-Pit' where the Masters' rooms were clustered but this was regarded as being the high point of advocacy by many barristers because full hearings in front of civil judges were so rare.

A glass or two of sherry often accompanied lunch in one of the Inn's halls and tea, if not taken in chambers, would be sipped at Twining's in Fleet Street, or the common room at Galahad's Inn (where the muffins were exceedingly good). Then at five, most of the barristers packed up for the day. Lionel, for example, would don his homburg whilst Perch held out his midnight-blue overcoat with its satin lapels, before the Great Man embarked on the ten minute walk to his flat in Gray's Inn.