

## Gym slips and fish and chips...

Peggy Fontaine was unhappy. Thirty years as Mrs T - the comical cleaning lady of the popular soap `Chippington Towers` - gone. *Cast aside like a soiled glove in some Regency farce. Damn him!* Penny, still in character as Mrs T in her floral pinny and tartan slippers, slumped onto a Hyde Park bench. The shades of a late summer afternoon slanted across the water as she clicked open her handbag and took out a quarter bottle of gin. A gulp and a grimace of guilt saw her light a cigarette; a flamboyant flick of her wrist sent the match sizzling into the Serpentine. She did not want to go home. She needed company. She prodded her mobile. Her oldest friend answered - they had been at St. Hilda`s together

`Hello, Penny? I thought you were filming today.`

`So did I Bunty....that bastard Nigel Grant...after thirty years..`

`Oh, Penny, darling! Look, come round to my place. I`ll pop a Marks and Spencer paella in the oven, we`ll thrash a bottle or two of Pinot Grigio – and you can tell me all about it...`

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Penny popped a portion of paella past the lip-gloss.

`So I told him, Bunty. Mrs T squashed to a jelly under a bus on Chippington High Street? Very dignified I said. “Look, sweetheart, he says, you get to linger for three weeks – it`s touch and go - family at the bedside, hearts and flowers, darling! Right up your street.”`

`You can piss *right* off, Nigel, I said. I`ve not played Mrs T for thirty years only for her to walk under a friggin` bus!`

`Mmm...` said Bunty Frobisher. She splashed a tidal wave of Pino into Penny`s glass.`Who are they getting to replace you, sweetie?`

Penny sobbed on the sofa. `That`s the worst part, Bunty. He`s got some bloody Bulgarian tart - all boobs and bum as usual. *I am an actress*, I said, not some cross-eyed little whore you picked up at King`s Cross. “Well, he says, you know where the door is, darling.”

`Bloody cheek!’ said Bunty. `Look, you stay here tonight, we`ll have a little nightcap and watch some telly, shall we?’

They settled down. Brandy was poured and the television switched on. Penny`s eyes popped at the sight of the television crew outside her Maida Vale flat. The reporter turned to camera.

`Tonight there is still no sign of Penny Fontaine after her dramatic departure from the popular soap, `Chippington Towers`. The nation holds its breath. Back to you in the studio, Rebecca.`

Bunty turned to Penny. `Only one thing for it, darling - Cliff Maxwell.`

`If you think so...`

Penny was pleased Her old friend would help. They linked little fingers and chanted as they had so many years ago at St. Hilda`s School.

*St. Hilda`s, St. Hilda`s, Rah, rah, rah!*

*Gym slips, fish and chips, knickers and bra!*

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At Broadcasting House, Peregrine Hawksley slammed his fist on the table. The carafe of water trembled. The glasses chinked. `Just what the hell were you thinking of, Richard? I mean, what are you using for brains these days - scrambled egg?’ He stalked round the room. `In God`s name, man - killing off the most popular soap character since Hilda bloody Ogden! The nation loves Mrs T! Half the daft buggers think she`s real – and what do *you* do? Chuck her under a bus!’

`*I am* the director-`

`Yes, and I`m the Director-General of the bloody BBC! I`ve had the PM on the phone this

morning. The election`s next week, and he wants Mrs T found and restored to her mops and buckets - or God help the licence fee.`

`I have my artistic integrity to think about-`

`My arse!` screamed Peregrine; he flourished a handful of newspapers. `Look at these! I`ll read them to you, shall I? Mrs. Mop gets the chop – Daily Mirror. Mrs T kicks the bucket - The Sun. Charlady victimised – The Guardian. Dear God above, Richard, you can`t fight the bloody media!`

He swished back the blinds and peered down Portland Place. A police constable was shepherding a straggling bunch of protesters towards Reception. A thin chant drifted up.

`Who do we want? Mrs T! When do we want her? Now!`

`Doooooooooh!` he groaned, and reeled the few steps to the table. Grabbing the director by his tie, he hauled him out of his chair.

`When this spectacular balls-up is over, you *dirty* little twerp - oh, yes, I know all about the Bulgarian bimbo - one of us is going to pay for it with his job - and that person, my *salacious* little friend,` - he showered a spray of spittle in the director`s face - `will not be Peregrine Hawksley MBE.!`

Richard Grant wiped his shirt sleeve across his face and shuffled out of the room. His nocturnal shenanigans at King`s Cross had come back to bite him in the traditional place – and hard.

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Cliff Maxwell, in a shady corner of his conservatory, poured the tea. Smuggling Penny Fontaine from Bunty Frobisher`s flat in the middle of the night had been the devil`s own job. Now, the two actresses sipped tea and nibbled biscuits under a cascading cheese plant. Chopin – Cliff was a Classic FM fan – tinkled from the kitchen.

`I`ve got a week,` rasped Cliff.

‘A weak what?’ said Bunty, with a girlish giggle. ‘Oh, I say! I don’t know where I get them from sometimes, really I don’t.’

‘A week,’ said Cliff, with a sigh, ‘to restore Mrs T to her rightful place. After that the punters get bored. Penny, I’ll need your slippers and your pinny.’

‘Slippers and pinny?’ piped Penny, ‘whatever for?’

‘We’re taking a trip to Brighton, you and I,’ he said, tapping his nose.

‘Ah, he works in a mysterious way, don’t you Cliffy?’ said Bunty. She gave him an adoring look.

‘That I do,’ said the publicity agent. ‘That I do. More tea, ladies?’

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As Wayne Rooney placed the ball on the penalty spot, the screen went blank. Across the nation – not least in the Prime Minister’s flat - strong men groaned.

‘We interrupt this programme to bring you news of national importance,’ pronounced a BBC voice. James Elder, who suspected his civil servants of keeping him in the dark on any number of things, edged forward on the sofa. The screen lit up. A reporter attempted to look solemn.

‘It’s the news the nation has been dreading. The floral pinny and tartan slippers of Mrs T have been found on the beach at Brighton. Police divers are searching the water, but there appears to be little hope. What prompted this tragedy we may never know. Back to the football.’

‘Bloody voters find out before the Prime Minister,’ grumbled James Elder in the Downing Street flat.

Bunty Frobisher, watching the poolside telly from the jacuzzi in Cliff Maxwell’s mansion, poured champagne and bubbled with happiness...*Oh, isn’t he just so clever? A perfect genius! And all the better for his latest divorce.*

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The police sergeant flicked off the football match from the tiny portable television behind his desk, and looked up in surprise. He did not follow the soaps, and recognised neither the wringing-wet woman, nor the equally wet and bedraggled man as they squelched across Brighton Marine Police Station.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked.

‘This lady is Peggy Fontaine,’ said the man – ‘otherwise known as Mrs. T.’

‘He saved my life!’ shrieked the woman – she had a strand of seaweed draped over her left ear - ‘I nearly drowned!’ She grabbed the young copper and pulled him half over the desk.

‘Drowned!’ she screamed in his face. ‘Do you hear me? Drowned! If it hadn’t been for...’ she released the policeman, and collapsed into her companion’s arms. ‘Thank you, oh, thank you from the bottom of my heart - whoever you are...’

The police sergeant took the prompt, and reached for his notebook. ‘And your name, sir?’ he enquired.

‘Maxwell,’ said the man, ‘my name is Clifford Maxwell.’

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‘Peregrine? James Elder here. What...? Yes, I know it’s two o’ clock in the naffing morning! Eh? You were doing what? You filthy old devil! Leaving that aside, Perry, I’ve just had a phone call. Say again? No, I was doing nothing of the sort! Mrs T has been found - on Brighton beach, almost drowned, apparently. What? You wish she *had* been drowned? Well, you’ll wish so even more when I tell you who saved her. Clifford bloody slime-ball Maxwell, that’s who! Now listen to me. Peggy Fontaine gets her job back, understand? Or else what? Or else you’re sacked, you back-stabbing old toe-rag! Pleasant dreams, Peregrine.’

James Elder replaced the receiver and fell into a troubled sleep.

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‘So there we are, girls,’ frothed Cliff Maxwell two weeks later in the cocktail bar

of the Hotel Splendido-Grand in Marbella. `Penny is restored as the nation`s premier charlady, and is now on the books of Maxwell Theatrical Enterprises. Perry Hawksley is reduced to a grovelling wreck, and dear old Richard Grant spends his time directing a revival of Andy Pandy on afternoon telly!` He splashed three glasses of champagne. `Oh, and James Elder, fresh from his glorious victory in the general election, is duly grateful for my gallant rescue of Mrs T from a watery grave, and will look favourably on my future doings.`

`Oh, but what about you, Bunty?` said Penny – she had a soft heart, `how do you come out of this?`

`As Mrs. Maxwell, to-be,` she beamed, and proffered a pinkie - the third finger of her left hand. On it flashed a titanic diamond ring.

`Oh, Bunty! screamed Penny.

`Oh, Penny!` screeched Bunty.

They linked little fingers and laughed.

`St. Hilda`s, St. Hilda`s, rah, rah, rah...!

Gym slips, fish and chips, knickers and bra!`

**The end**

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