

DAMNED CATALAN!

When you have spent your whole life working hard and have finally managed to get your hands on what they call a well-deserved rest, it can feel as if all that remains is to wait for your days to slowly count down. Life then loses much of its meaning as you accept that your earthly sojourn is reaching its end and everything you could have done or decided not to do now belongs to the past. So suddenly feeling useful again gives you a new lease on life. Getting back to making decisions, sitting behind a desk, feeling necessary, immersing yourself in the ins and outs of the problems that build up and finding solutions makes you feel as if you had been given a grace period. It can almost feel as if the final deadline has been put back.

Alfred Gordon walked up the stairs of the Foreign Office with just that feeling burning in his soul and a thought in his brain: his wife Helen had protested when she found out he had taken Secretary of State Grenville up on his offer.

'We have more than enough money,' she had said. 'You have spent your entire life working and it is high time you had a rest. The doctors say it not good for you to get worked up and I know you won't just stick to the things you have to do. And that is not good.'

The thing is she likes country life and all the romanticism of the flowers and meadows; she sees the London house as just a place to spend the winter, Gordon thought. They eventually made a deal: he would sort out the matter Lord Grenville had put to him but when he had finished he would finally retire. He had promised. Anyway, it would only take a few weeks. A couple of months at the most. Maybe three. And Helen had accepted but did not sound too convinced.

When he got to the last step he shook his head. He had just realised that Helen did not share that feeling of her life losing its meaning. Of course she did not! The change wrought by his retirement did not shake the foundations of her personal universe. She carried on running the house as if nothing had changed and took all the decisions that entailed. As well as others, of course! And he could not forget the strict diet she had him on. No sauces, no stews, nothing with any taste. And not much salt on the vegetables either. Doctor's orders.

That was one of the advantages of being a woman. Their responsibilities are still there, still alive, and there is no lessening of activity until their physical strength gives out. The fact her husband no longer worked meant she got to see him more and she was free to wield the power that had been hitherto hidden away. No wonder she was not happy about going back to the way things were! 'Well ... she will just have to put up with it!' he concluded. For the time being there were more urgent problems facing England.

Another surprise was that it was not until Gordon went back into his old office that he realised he had never noticed the smell given off by the dark wooden desk, which spread from the stack of papers and impregnated the walls. Perhaps over the many years he had spent there, it had got into his clothes and skin and he had needed some time away to see that that smell was part of his personality and that his personality was part of that office. It might be more correct to say that that office was an important part of his existence or perhaps he should simply accept it as a mirror image of his character. Perhaps, because that first day he realised

something had changed. Benson had told him four replacements had come and gone; Sir Arthur just could not find the right person. The last one had seemed a good fit. He had tried to make his assigned space his own, but although you can move the desk, put up a painting, add a personal touch or repaint the room (which he had not done because the ministry's budget was a bit stretched), it is no easy task to clean the walls and wash away all the feelings, memories, arguments, successes and failures, the good and bad times enthusiasm has spat at the walls with such energy it has gone through the outer coat and stuck to the brick beneath.

That feeling came over him so powerfully it reminded him of the day he and his wife had moved into the London house. It had been many, many years earlier and Helen had said,

'One day this house will be ours.'

He had not understood at the time. The house was theirs. They had paid for it. He could have sworn it was theirs because he had the deeds, his bank account had been emptied and he had a mortgage he had to repay or the bankers would strip him to the bone. But now, back in that office, he understood the great truth in his wife's words. Unless they are new, houses preserve the spirits of those who have lived there and the old ghosts linger on until new spirits evict them. It is a sometimes cruel struggle and there can be only one winner. It is often the new tenants who end up losing. They absorb some of the virtues or defects of the walls themselves or the former owner's furniture, armchair or decoration. That is why ministers, the only ones with the power to change things, redecorate their domain when they first move into their offices. They would never allow anything their predecessor had done to determine their own decisions. Gordon obviously had never felt that need because he had sat behind the same desk in the same office for years. Now he just needed to bring back that atmosphere that allowed him to do his work as suitably and effectively as possible and everything would carry on as if those months of retirement had never existed. He knew perfectly well that new bosses always want to change everything, even the environment everyone else works in. And Benson knew it even better. He had served Gordon's replacements and looked on with horror and resignation as his little den was shaken by the earthquake whose epicentre was the desk in the last commissioner's office. So he smiled a happy smile when he found out Alfred Gordon was coming back. Especially when he learned his former boss had insisted on having his old office and working with the man who had been his secretary for so many years. Benson had not liked them moving his superior's desk, so he was pleased to see it in front of him when he opened the door. Facing the wall as he worked helped him concentrate better. It was an obsession of Gordon's from the very first day. Things were finally back as they had been for Benson.

'Sir Alfred Gordon!' he exclaimed with a bow when he met the former commissioner again.

Ah! Sir Alfred Gordon. That title before his name sounded good and Benson pronounced it emphatically.

That had been a great day; a ceremony at which Helen had felt awkward, Gordon remembered. It was the first time his wife had been so close to the king and surrounded by so many important people. And Gordon? He was overjoyed to have his children, daughters-in-law and grandchildren there. He had even invited Angelines and Tom, who had brought their children, Anna and Matt, from Reigate. He smiled when he thought of Tom's son, that four-year-old lad who never stopped reminding him he was an old fat man.

Abuelo Gordo, Fat Grandfather, he called him.

'Gordon. The name's Gordon,' he tried to correct him.

'In Madrid they say Gordo,' the boy replied, reminding him that "gordo" means fat in Spanish. 'And my name is Mateo. You must call me Matt. Remember?'

'Alright,' he smiled. 'I'll call you Matt if you call me Gordon.'

'But you are *Abuelo Gordo*,' the boy cried, throwing his arms wide to give him an idea of just how big his body was.

Not even his own grandchildren dared mention his vast size but Matt was a charming rebel just like his father, as sharp as a razor. It was from Tom he had learned to speak English. Ever since he had first started to talk he had called Gordon *Abuelo Gordo*. Fat Grandfather, English Grandfather, he said when he talked about things in Madrid. 'If we have one house in Madrid and another in Reigate, and I have a grandfather in Madrid, I must have another grandfather in Reigate,' Matt reasoned. 'He lives in London,' Erquiza, his grandfather in Madrid, reminded him. 'Same thing,' Matt shrugged. 'But you don't have a grandmother here in Madrid,' Erquiza replied. 'Grandmother is in heaven,' he replied. 'Your grandmother from Reigate is in heaven too,' Erquiza said, following the same line of reasoning. 'Now Helen is my grandmother in London,' Matt smiled. 'Your grandfather from Reigate is in heaven too,' Erquiza exclaimed. 'Yes, but *Abuelo Gordo* is still there,' Matt concluded and no-one could change his mind. Alfred naturally felt happy because that child had given him a role that fit him like a glove. His grandchildren were getting older and Matt made him feel younger.

Odd people, those Spaniards, Alfred thought. Angelines was a prime example. The first day they met she called him *Don* Alfred. He was *Señor* Gordon to everyone except her. Her father was Don Santiago and Gordon could not be treated as any less than him, the girl reasoned. Now he was Sir Alfred Gordon but he let her keep calling him *Don* Alfred. He felt rather flattered.

Angelines! She had become quite a woman. She was no longer that shy little girl Tom had introduced to him. She moved very gracefully and seemed very sure of herself.

There was one person who was none too pleased at his return to the ministry but who managed to hide it and even feign joy at his arrival: Sir Arthur. Not that it mattered, as Gordon was not under his command. Obviously! Now they were equals. Depending on how you looked at it, you could even say he was a step above his former boss because he had the Secretary of State's backing, while Sir Arthur had been discretely put in a corner and was more frequently assigned secondary tasks that reduced the earning power he was used to. Business opportunities arise in a ministry when you are in a position of responsibility but no-one looks to those who no longer have any decision-making power.

It had been a pleasure to meet Sir Arthur again on his first day back.

'Gordon!' Sir Arthur had cried when he saw him in the corridor.

'How goes it, Blum?' he answered without further ado.

That had shut the idiot up. How dare he address me with such familiarity? Blum thought. But straight away he remembered Gordon had been knighted just a couple of days earlier. Blum had thought up some excuse not to attend.

'Well ... Alfred. Thank you,' Sir Arthur finally conceded. It was a struggle to accept they were now equals.

'Very pleased to hear it ... Arthur,' Gordon had replied sarcastically and his former boss's face flushed red.

Sitting there now in his old chair, which he had managed to rescue from an office where they had shut it away because it was too big, Gordon put his memories aside and concentrated on the matter at hand.

He had all the documents he had wrested from Sir Arthur's grasp on the desk before him. Sir Arthur had been unable to make anything of them and on this

occasion Gordon was inclined to agree. All of the information in those papers seemed to clearly point to the head of the information services not being far wrong. After a few days of heavy reading and deep thought, Gordon had gone to speak to Grenville. He smiled whenever he remembered that conversation.

'I can't find anything strange in all this information,' he had said. 'What makes you think they are hiding something?'

'Sir Arthur thinks all this is nothing more than a scientific expedition,' Grenville replied.

'Oh!' Gordon had exclaimed.

It was not a concrete argument but experience had shown that when Sir Arthur thought one thing, the opposite was likely to be true. That balloon business in Cordoba was proof enough. So Gordon had set to work.

According to the reports, Domingo Badia had come to London with Simon de Rojas Clemente. Apparently he could speak Arabic. Before they crossed the channel they stopped in Paris to speak to Talleyrand-Périgord, Méchain and Beautemps-Beaupré. Very interesting, Gordon had thought. He had heard of two of them. Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord was a renegade bishop who had been French Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1797 to 1799. He had now been unmasked as one of Napoleon's collaborators. Pierre-François André Méchain was a well-known astronomer. As Sir Arthur had said, for a hothead and an amateur Domingo Badia certainly moved in important circles. Gordon could not quite place Beautemps-Beaupré.

'I can find information about Beautemps-Beaupré,' Benson had said.

'Don't waste your time. We can see where this is headed,' Gordon had replied.

And it was true. It was normal enough for Badia to have visited an astronomer if he was off on a scientific expedition. And his meeting with a former French Minister for Foreign Affairs? That showed he was canvassing support from embassies and consulates, which was completely understandable if he was planning to journey into unknown lands.

In addition to all this, Badia was not hiding away. News of his trip had been published in *Diario de Madrid* on 28 November 1801. There was only one detail he found surprising. British agents in Madrid had said the Spanish Royal Academy of History had been asked for their opinion on the trip. The academy regarded Domingo Badia as an amateur who did not have a solid grounding in the subject and, following the Spanish maxim of letting others do the inventing, recommended leaving such expeditions to the French and English. However, Godoy had gone against everyone's opinion and put the project to King Charles IV of Spain, who had approved it against all expectations.

Since the famous air balloon project could have been of military interest, Gordon supposed that there was something else hidden behind this business. So he ordered agents to follow Badia while he was in London. They had found out little so perhaps Sir Arthur was right for once in his life. At least that was what all the reports Benson gave him every day seemed to suggest.

Badia had met with Joseph Banks, Dr Maskelyne, Sharon Turner and Major Rennell. He had told all of them about his scientific plans. He had spoken to Banks about diseases, to Maskelyne about scientific matters, and to Major Rennell about geographic locations because the military man had partially explored the region and made some maps. He obviously wanted to know what he might find and all the details one needs to know to carry out such an expedition. So in summary: nothing out of the ordinary.

Gordon leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. He had not slept all

that well and had got up feeling tired.

'This whole sorry tale will only lead to disappointment,' Helen kept telling him. The day before his leg had started hurting again.

'I'm feeling a bit tired. That's all,' he had replied.

'You should be retired,' his wife scolded him. 'Is a knighthood worth more to you than your health?'

Women! They always saw the worst side of any situation. 'Let's not even think about that!' he exclaimed and focussed on his work again.

He looked through the list of all the supplies Badia had bought. He had ordered a 10-inch completely reflective circle and four noniuses from Troughton. He had purchased a 2½-foot achromatic telescope from Dolland. And had bought a chronometer from Brooksbanks and another from Pennington. The noniuses were to precisely measure longitude. What did he need all that for if it was not a scientific expedition?

It seemed Gordon would not be back at work for long. If it carried on like this he would have to accept that Sir Arthur was right, close the case and retire for a second time. Then he would fall back into Helen's clutches. 'Well what can you do? That's just the way life is,' he sighed.

A rapping on the door brought him back from his thoughts.

'Come in,' he said.

The small door to Benson's office opened and his secretary appeared.

'Here is yesterday's report, Sir Alfred,' Benson announced, handing him the document.

'Give me a summary,' Gordon requested. 'I don't feel like reading.'

'The only noteworthy thing is that yesterday Domingo Badia left his hotel alone and went to Sir William Blizard's surgery. He was there for two hours. All the colour had drained from his face by the time he left. According to the report, he was as white as snow and walking slowly. He took a carriage back to the hotel and did not leave his room even for dinner. He ordered food to be brought to him in his room but barely even tasted it. Rojas Clemente did go down to the dining room and he had a very concerned look on his face. He has not left his rooms today,' Benson explained in his concise style.

'Perhaps he is feeling unwell,' Gordon suggested.

'According to our inquiries, Sir William gave him an operation for phimosis.'

'An operation for what?' Gordon asked.

'They cut open the prepuce and let it all out.'

'What's that? What are you talking about?' a bewildered Gordon pressed him. 'I don't know anything about medicine. What's a prepuce when it's at home? Please, speak plainly.'

'They have cut the skin off his penis so it is exposed.'

'Aaaaah!' Gordon shuddered, closing his legs tight. 'That's horrific! What, the whole thing?'

'Just the bit around the tip ... ' Benson said, illustrating words with hands, holding the tips of his fingers together and making a scissor-like shape with his other hand.

'Spare me the details!' Gordon almost screamed. The colour was starting to drain from his face too.

'Well you did ask ...' Benson said, excusing himself.

Two afternoons later, Helen swung open the front door to see her husband standing on the steps, his arm in the air.

'Don't you even dare!' she cried, standing there defiantly, hands on hips.

Alfred looked down at the flower as the executioner eyes a condemned man. He then looked at his cane, which had been about to swing and cut its neck, the stem in this case, to remove the head from the body, the flower from the rest of the plant. He took a deep breath and slowly lowered his arm. He finally hung his head and went inside followed by Helen, who closed the door and frowned at him.

'I have had an awful day,' Gordon explained.

'Well it is hardly the flower's fault.'

'And to top it all, my foot hurts.'

'See?' she exclaimed. 'You don't listen to the doctors and then a poor innocent flower has to pay the price.'

'I'm sorry,' he said but since his wife's expression remained unchanged he added, 'What? Do you want me to go outside and apologise to your darling flower? Shall I get down on my knees?'

All throughout dinner Alfred did not open his mouth except to eat. Looks like trouble, Mrs Gordon thought. But when she saw him sitting silently in his thinking chair timidly looking down between his legs from time to time, she was truly surprised to see her husband's lips twist and his eyes open exceedingly wide. Real trouble! She had never seen him like that. He was not angry like on other occasions, more befuddled.

Oh well! Helen decided to sit in another armchair and wait quietly until Alfred got over it.

'Why would he have done that?' Alfred suddenly mumbled.

'What, dear?'

'Cut himself ...' her husband said, looking down between his legs again.

'Who? Cut what?' Helen said, shocked, looking towards the same place as her husband.

'That Domingo Badia.'

'He cut his balls off ...?' Helen asked, eyes wide as plates.

'No. Just the prepuce.'

'What's the prepuce?'

'The skin around it ...'

'Oh!' Helen blushed. 'So why did he do it?'

'That's what I'm wondering. Did he not know he was suffering from phimosis till today?' Alfred exclaimed, his lips twisting once more and his eyes opening ever so wide.