

## The Return - Hannah Grey

*Hobart loomed large on the social map recently. Temperatures went up several degrees under a mixed impetus of envy, admiration and parochial importance, engendered by the marriage of native-born Pauline Curran to her Russian Prince—Maximilian Melikoff.*

*Truth (Sydney newspaper) Sunday February 7, 1926.*

*The Imperial Hadley's Hotel — Two Weeks Before the Wedding.*

Pauline smoked more than usual on her return to the island. Her hair was cut shorter; her eyes were shadowed darker. Her lips were painted rhubarb mauve. She held furs, new fabrics revealed her calves; she was now a thoroughly modern woman. Before her European travels she was a permanent resident at the Imperial Hadley's Hotel, but when the doors of the hotel opened to her once again, her bags were taken up to a very different suite. She was now to stay in the prized room of 175, because behind the Tasmanian girl followed a prince.

175 boasted everything one would expect: multiple rooms separated by French double-doors, and a large balcony of cedar balustrade that looked over the streets of Hobart and the sandstone of St David's Cathedral. The room had a deep-set bath, hot rose-and-vetiver scented towels within two minutes of a request, and was positioned right near the gentle thrum of the electric elevator. This location was useful if the guest in 175 wished to visit the ice rink with ease, visit the lounge for a whisky sour at an odd hour, or gain quick access to the staircase that angled down towards the ballroom. Other guests often spoke of these amenities in covetous tones over coffee, while some guests resisted this residential lust, such as the governor's daughter, Miss Margaret O'Grady, who delicately declared her room *quite* spacious, and *quite* scenic, although she was often last to retire upstairs.

However, the guest in 175 never spoke of her favourite amenity: from the interior balcony, she could see it all. The private spherical gallery looked over the wide marble expanse of the atrium. It provided the vantage point to spy on seven of the fifteen tables in the dining hall on the right through the large spiral-patterned

windows. Through these windows, the guest in 175 could even catch a glimpse of the further right-adjointing room; the white interior studded with chairs that were lined up in anticipation of a marital reception.

I can't tell you as much as you would like, but I can tell you that I was there in the hotel, in the days and nights before the wedding. The couple returned to the island just two weeks prior to the grand event, and Pauline's acquaintances descended upon the hotel in preparation, flashing into rooms, shaking out their best dresses and taking their place in the party. It was a strange time. They noticed Pauline was different: measured, worldly, and adorned with the intangible sheen of high society. Her speech was keenly observed and she was never without company. The men of Hobart had never been of interest and now she had met a man who had lived through it all.

Prince Melikoff had survived the demolition of Russian Tsarist society, and had been awarded the Order of St George, the highest Russian medal for valour, for commanding hundreds of Cossacks in the war and sleeping rough alongside them. His previous life in the cultured and royal centre of St Petersburg was long forgotten. These events resulted in his fractured personality: I thought he oscillated between gentleman and ruffian with a certain restlessness. Mr and Mrs Grubb thought him reticent, while others were charmed by his sophistication. They noted the invisible strings of propriety that held his back straight, and saw not the lines on his face but the light in his eyes.

Things happened in the hotel, and I caught some of them in vertical motions and horizontal sweeps of the eye. I know the others saw more than I did, though they sat within the scene, and I sat outside it.

*In the Atrium — Twelve Days Before the Wedding.*

Breakfast was served in the atrium of the Imperial. The help flittered between tables, amid stacks of bone china and starched tablecloths that stretched towards the black and white tiles. The steam from the tea misted Mrs Wilmot's glasses, and the gentle clink and clatter of cutlery pricked the air. Coffee was served with fresh cream, and paired with just-baked madelines that broke apart with a thin dessert fork. Lush fronds of greenery reached out to those breakfasting, providing slatted privacy from those sitting adjacent in the lounge, where I sat with a sketchbook. However, the aspidistra did little to hide guests from those watching from above.

I spied Pauline as she cracked open the double doors of 175, and surveyed the scene below her. Mr and Mrs Dowling were already seated. Miss Margaret O’Grady sat in the centre of the expanse, as these proceedings had lately revolved around her. Mr Brain was there too, lounging in the corner, his too-short trousers revealing thick white socks. Pauline had caught up with these acquaintances only briefly in the two days since her return.

“It seems an age since we saw you last.” Mr Brain’s reading glasses dropped to his chest as Pauline entered the atrium. “Tell us. Did you travel west, across Southern Australia to Ceylon?”

“And then on to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean,” Pauline finished.

“And good morning to you!” She leaned back as her tea was served.

“Were you sick on the seas? Tell us about Buckingham Palace!” Mrs Brain inquired, reaching across Mr Brain for some toast.

“Not at all. The Palace was special.”

“Buckingham Palace was a bore,” Miss O’Grady returned her teacup to its saucer with a clatter: “The boutiques of London—”

Mr Brain snorted.

“The weather in Paris—” she pushed on.

“Tell us, Pauline, how did—” Mrs Wilmot begun.

“—and the Tennis in Cannes are worthy matters for discussion,” Miss O’Grady insisted. The daughter of a working-class Irish Catholic, she was presented at the palace due to her father’s appointment as Governor of Tasmania, an appointment that was not made without comment. Governors were typically of faultless lineage, having previously been knights or soldiers, and it was a wonder that the imperial authorities offered him the position. While O’Grady kissed the hand of the King and was duly knighted upon his visit to London, it remained that his daughter was not yet well versed in the nuances of Hobart society. Pauline glanced in her direction, permitting a lazy smile to spread across her face.

“We may have passed each other on the high seas.”

“Yes! Though while I returned alone, you were beginning your journey to procure a prince. And where is the man himself?”

The party laughed as Prince Melikoff appeared behind her.

“Good morning. Thoughts on today’s agenda?” Mrs Wilmot addressed the Prince.

“A walk by the water, perhaps?”

“Oh, not the sleaze of Salamanca. I don’t care for it.”

Mrs Wilmot continued to comb over the midday agenda when the Governor rushed into the atrium, dishevelled.

“I’m just stopping by on the way to the Athenaeum and—” He hastened towards the coffee, but straightened as he saw who was positioned by the mantel, broad-shouldered, stiff-lipped and holding a teacup with a neat elbow.

“Ah. Prince Melikoff?”

“Yes. And you?” The prince knocked back his shot of coffee, his yellow teeth clashing oddly against the pink and gold china.

The Governor shrank slightly, clutching his teacup.

“The Governor, sir.”

“And you, sir, have made the trip to Russia?”

O’Grady straightened his spine and put down his cup, wavering in his position between the Prince’s stare and the stacked china.

“In the spring of 1917 I was sent, yes.”

“To?”

“To discuss the war effort, sir.”

“And what did you discuss?”

In the corner, Mr Brain hovered awkwardly just out of his chair, his serviette sliding off his knees. O’Grady’s cheeks paled to the shade of spoiled cream. Neither man knew how to interrupt the uneasy course of conversation.

“To persuade the Russian Minister of War that the war effort was not futile, sir.”

A cool silence fell over the party. The Prince was exiled for the war O’Grady had travelled across the world to support. Upon catching Pauline’s eye the Prince lifted his tone.

“A long journey then, sir.”

“Yes, a long journey. I—”

“I think I’m going to take up golf,” Miss Margaret O’Grady announced. Mr Brain, who had long paused with his mouth full of madelines, coughed heavily, the icing sugar collecting on his whiskers. Mrs Brain unfroze herself in time to administer a neat slap under the table. Who to, I wasn’t sure.

*In the Dining Hall — Five Days Before the Wedding.*

I was enjoying a steak in silence when a couple sat down at the table to my left. The girl looked quite young, and seemed overdressed for the occasion. She immediately ordered a Tom Collins. Her companion was older and took time to study the reds on the wine list. I'd never noticed these guests before, and presumed they were new to the hotel. From where I sat I could see through to the atrium and the balcony of 175 where Pauline was reading. The girl eyed Pauline with interest.

"Why did he agree to follow her back?" The Imperial, in all its local grandeur, paled in comparison as she imagined the glitz of Monte Carlo. Her companion laughed and leaned in.

"He didn't follow her. He led the way down south."

She stirred her drink, wide-eyed, scrunching her nose in confusion.

"He doesn't have eyes in the back of his head. He would have been waiting for the bullet in the back. An exiled Russian prince ought not to remain; an exiled Russian prince is to be disposed of."

Inwardly he smirked at his embellishments. Pleased with his work of fiction, he leaned back as she leaned in.

"So what of Tasmania?"

"Tasmania is his Monte Carlo, darling. A Tasmanian girl provided the perfect excuse to escape to the end of the earth."

His neck formed a crescent in the light as he tilted back to create a smoke ring, pleased with his revelation.

Her silhouette was set against the geometric wallpaper. Her eyes sparked as she took in the crystal detailing of the chandelier above them. It seemed as though she had only imagined Tasmania to be at the end of the empire, and it now was slick with a gloss as she imagined the island in the eyes of a foreigner.

"Huh. Who would have thought. This place is dripping with diamonds."

*In the Lounge Bar — Three Nights Before the Wedding.*

There were tunnels underneath the hotel, and a very different romance transpired secretly within them. Not everyone knew of the tunnels; I believe that only some of the guests were aware of their existence. I stumbled across them once, a

casual consequence of pressing the wrong button on the elevator. They twisted and turned at sharp angles, and ran like veins along the underbelly of the establishment. One tunnel stubbed off below the bar; the spot where the staff tended to gather for a drink, and the first lit cigarette set the party on fire; and only the thick smut of a kerosene lamp leaking into the darkness could cut through the smoky haze.

But it was Henri's spot, the lone jazz player who instilled the tunnel with its lifeblood, and when I remained in the lounge bar I could hear his sound drift up from below. Henri liked a certain staffer and the two of them often disappeared beneath the floor. He would play for her alone, and she would laugh, laugh, laugh, but Mrs Wilmot said that the sound travelled up the pipes to her room on the third floor.

In the early hours of the evening Henri appeared above ground as a reluctant pianist, entertaining those in the lounge with snappy songs in C major. Some nights he played beautifully. Other nights he incurred the wrath of patrons for jumping off the keys too frequently in favour of his scotch; the confined polish of the piano appeared to irk him. But on the nights before the wedding he stole the show, and tonight was no exception. It was then I spotted Pauline and Prince Melikoff, who seemed to enjoy their momentary anonymity in the darkness of the lounge, their heads together, deep in discussion.

It was the midnight hour on the grandfather clock that I enjoyed, when the musician and his lover disappeared beneath the floor. Guests retired upstairs, fewer staff hung about, and those that remained folded white linen and polished glasses. Only Pauline and the Prince continued their hushed discussion, while listening to Henri's *wahhwahh*, and the resulting laughter.

*In Room 23 (the Smallest Suite) — Four Days Before the Wedding.*

Mrs Brain was on her bed when she heard the small party down the hall. She was furious that she had not been invited to the soiree. She bounced up, prancing two steps to the left, preparing to perform between the bed and the bathroom. Her leg flexed beneath her nightie, and she snatched up her glasses and an old newspaper that hadn't quite made it into the bin. She cleared her throat and placed a hand to it:

*"Miss Curran and her mother have been in England for about twelve months and have just recently (according to her letter) concluded a delightful motor tour of the South of France and Italy. She wrote from Nice where she was enjoying a very*

*gay time*. Huh! Melikoff was Pauline's chauffeur. That was how they met, that was who he was. A *worker*. Royal he is not!"

She read from *The Mercury*, adding partial caveats in a bitter, grating voice that was lost to the party enjoying themselves down the hall. Mr Brain gazed at her impassively from the bed, smoke curling around his figure.

*Room 175 — The Night Before the Wedding.*

The hotel was chaotic; the staff couldn't contain the guests swarming through the rooms in a delirious fashion. The heat compounded the bursts of fragrance from the flowers that were still being chivvied through the lobby by frazzled staff. The hotel was expecting one hundred guests at the reception and hundreds more to line the streets outside it. It was difficult to write anything among the whispers and shouts and keen anticipation. I was taking a breath on Murray Street when I heard the door open on the balcony above. I paused. Two chairs were scraped back and I heard quiet laughter and the sounds of a table organised with teacups. It was the balcony of 175.

"We won't leave right away mother."

"Right away?"

"We will stay four months," Pauline replied.

"Four months," her mother mused.

"Four months," Pauline repeated. "Then to Sydney, and then to Maximilian's family home on the Riviera. We've decided to live there awhile."

"Europe will be your home?"

I glanced up, and saw mother and daughter looking over the city.

*The reception was held at the Imperial and was a very brilliant affair. The decorations done by Miss Sayer were carried out in pink cactus dahlias, white Shasta daisies, and mauve pansies. Five thousand of these pansies were laid flat upon the tables. Over the bridal table was a canopy of pink cactus dahlias and gypsophilia with pink gauze bell suspended in the centre.*

*The toasts were first "His majesty the King" proposed by Sir Elliott Lewis, and drunk by all standing. The National Anthem followed.*

*-The Mercury (Hobart newspaper) Thursday January 21 1926.*

**Author's note:** Five thousand people lined the streets of Hobart on the wedding day. Governor O'Grady was notably absent from the wedding due to unknown engagements. In 1955 Princess Melikoff returned to Hobart. Prior to her death Pauline established a trust fund with two beneficiaries: St Ann's Homes for the Aged and the Tasmanian Government wildlife protection services. In 2008, the Princess Melikoff Trust Fund was estimated to be worth \$15 million.