

When life comes at you

Pell-Mell

do you recoil or rejoice?

***A novel by
Nora Lourie Percival***

Kent Hollow Press

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Dedicated to
those who marry in haste ...
particularly if they repent
at leisure

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Reluctantly the scholar's mind retreated from the twelfth century to the Reading Room of the British Museum where he sat. What was that persistent sound somewhere behind him, so alien in the prescribed hush of the magnificent hall? Like the steady tapping of a mallet, like the monotonous beat of a busy woodpecker, it drilled into his concentration, pulling it away from the ancient tome through whose pages he was riding with Richard the Lion Heart and his own ancestor Sir Richard de Percival to do battle against the Turk.

Byron Pelham blinked his weary eyes and hunched his shoulders to limber a stiff spine. The ache told him it was time for a break from his exploration of the Crusades and the life of England's first King Richard. As he turned to see what had disturbed him, his eyes ranged approvingly past a woman's bright face. In her body language he read impatience.

Was she just tired of waiting for her ordered books at the central desk nearby? She was twisting an end of her short dark hair and jiggling her leg, making her high heel tap in rhythm. A trim figure in the obligatory little black dress which said 'city girl' – but a scarlet scarf chosen to draw eyes slashed the silhouette. She was casting her eyes around the room, perhaps seeking an empty carrel – or interesting faces.

As she met his gaze, the young woman smiled sheepishly and dropped her eyes. The jiggling stopped as she heard the librarian say, "Miss Block, your books are here."

"Thank you." Melanie Block shifted her bag to her left shoulder and wrapped her arms around the stack of

bound news magazines. The “British Invasion” was old news in the States, but the entertainment sections of popular magazines from the era should give her ... “New perspectives ... fresh language,” Mr. Spector had said when he gave her the assignment. The ad campaign for Mary Quant’s home decorating line must generate the same excitement in American housewives that her fashions had a decade earlier. And if Melanie did a really terrific job on this assignment she was sure she’d move up from researcher to copywriter at the agency. At least it had given her the opportunity to get a week of paid time, which made this trip possible.

Amused by the woman’s fidgets, Pelham tipped back in his chair and turned his mind to contemplate the misty dome high above him. It delighted him -- the noble height of the shallow curve, the splendid scale of the structure. The clustered whale ribs between long windows soared up and up, and his spirit soared with it. Stretching his long legs to ease them, he mused upon the historic room, crowded with the ghosts of favorite writers, where he hoped for inspiration as well as information. His eyes began to close as he relaxed, when ...

Crash! Bam! Books and papers rained down on Byron’s legs and a startled scream exploded near his ear as his chair came down on four legs and sat him up. His eyes opened wide in shock. “What the --?” he blurted, as faces turned and indignant voices protested the shattered silence of the room.

The woman in black was picking herself up off the floor at his feet. In the midst of her scattered belongings, she raised the face he’d noticed earlier to stare into his in surprise.

Was it my stretched-out legs that tripped her? Byron wondered with a touch of guilt, as he bent to help pick up scattered copies of *The Illustrated London News*

and various magazines and a lipstick that had rolled out of her purse. With a like impulse at the same moment, his victim bent down and --Crack! Their heads collided, eliciting a shrill "Ouch!" that produced another chorus of shushes .

"I beg your pardon," Byron said. "I'm afraid I was woolgathering and didn't see --" She shook her head.

"My fault. I couldn't see where I was going, with this armload. I'm such a klutz." Both rubbed their bruised foreheads as she went on. "I didn't mean to disturb you, or the Reading Room," she giggled in apology as she looked around the radiating rows of tables, and seats holding irritated faces. "I'm Mel Block," she volunteered.

"I'm afraid it was my fault, spreading myself out like that.

I was getting cramped, sitting bent over so long." His sheepish answering grin was engaging. "I'm Byron Pelham, and I do apologize."

"No need," Mel said as she deposited her load in the next space. "I was trying to get to this empty desk before the stack collapsed and -- there's so much stuff ..." She was still flustered.

Remembering Reading Room rules, Byron whispered, "I'm afraid we shouldn't be talking in here. They're pretty strict." He handed her the things he'd gathered. "But I'm very pleased to meet you."

She flashed him a brilliant smile as she mouthed "Me too," while she sat down and began to arrange her things. Byron turned back to King Richard, but his mind was not on the page. Stealing glances at the 'girl next door,' he wondered what she was doing in this scholarly retreat. Her looks

did not suggest a pedant. Her ruffled black hair gleamed; the dancing chocolate eyes were lowered to the page. The noncommittal black dress outlined a neat figure and all her gestures signaled vitality.

An unlikely person to be spending the radiant spring day among musty old books, Byron thought. Surprised at himself, he wondered why he was so taken with this woman; he seldom paid much notice to the passing parade. But this one was nothing like the females at the North Carolina college where he taught – teenish and unkempt, or academic and pretentious, none engaging. This woman stirred his senses. He thought of the faint musk of her perfume when their heads bumped, the soft strands of hair that brushed across his face.

The next time he raised his eyes, he met hers contemplating him, her bright red mouth pursed. He wondered what she was thinking, pleased by the idea that she too was intrigued by their encounter.

After some thought he scribbled a brief note on his scratch pad and slid the page across to her. She read, “I think it’s about lunch time. Would you like to join me?”

Mel promptly nodded. “I’ll meet you outside,” she mouthed. “In ten minutes?” She spread out her ten fingers. “Is it okay to leave my stuff here?”

He was waiting when she came out the door, and guided her down a corridor past glass cases that offered a feast of historic treasures. “This is the most incredible place,” Mel said, her head swinging left and right. “To think of casually strolling by the *Magna Carta* or *Shakespeare’s First Folio*! It makes my head spin just to be here.”

“How long have you been working in the Reading Room?”

“Oh, this is my first day,” she said. “I just got my reader’s ticket this morning. I can’t believe I’m actually sitting in that marvelous room. I just got to London the day before yesterday. My first visit, too. Do you live here?”

“Oh, no, I live in America, but I like to visit

London. I have family connections here.” “Where shall we eat? Is there someplace nearby? Not too expensive.” She smiled, asking for understanding.

“Very close,” Byron assured her. “There’s a nice little coffee shop in the museum grounds, right off the Great Court here. I thought we might go there; it’s just down those stairs. It’s quite reasonable.” He took her elbow to guide her down, surprised to find that the feel of her arm stirred him.

The lunchroom was cozy after the vast formal spaces upstairs. As they settled down to get acquainted, Byron said, “Mel must be a nickname. What does it come from?”

Across the table his companion made a face. “It’s really Melanie,” she admitted. “I just hate it. My mother was entranced with ‘Gone with the Wind,’ but I’ve never felt like that mealy-mouthed Melanie. So I answer only to Mel.”

He laughed. “I know just how you feel. My name comes from an old family connection with the poet, and appealed to my mother’s snobbery. But I have no affinity with that libertine Lord Byron. I’m happy to say my friends all call me Pell.”

“Then I will too,” All at once Mel got a fit of the giggles. “Pell and Mel! That’s what we are. That’s how we met – pellmell. Wow, that’s us!”

Byron was enchanted. “You’re right. We certainly did meet each other pell-mell. We should be a team.” He laughed and hitched his chair closer. “So what brought you here?”

Mel smiled, then turned back to reality and picked up the menu. “Let’s order first. I’m hungry. What’s good? English food is so different, isn’t it?”

“A little,” he admitted. “But their meat pies are great.” He picked up his menu. “I think I’ll have my usual Cornish pasty.”

“Then I’ll have the same, Pell. I want to learn about English food and -- and everything. I feel so -- so ignorant here. I’m from America too.”

“I guessed that.” Pell was amused by her naiveté.

“Did you, Professor ‘Iggins?’” Mel laughed, mimicking Eliza Doolittle. “I guess you could tell by the way I talk. At first I was sure you were English. You sound English. I suppose that’s why you use words like ‘woolgathering’ that I never heard before. What does it mean?”

“It just means ‘not paying attention.’ We use it in America as well. Though it is an old expression. But I guess some Englishisms have rubbed off on me.”

Mel smiled her pussycat smile. “I think Englishmen are exciting.”

Pell grinned. “Well, my family was English – way back --at least on my grandmother’s side. She was a Percival, from a very old English family. Though we’ve been American for generations.

Since before the Revolution, in fact. I do have cousins here, and uncles, and I did my graduate work at Oxford.”

“Oh, I guess that’s why you seem so English to me. That’s way different from us. Poppa came to the States from Poland after he was grown up.” Her head went up defensively. “I’m the first American generation – at least on one side. Momma’s folks are from Michigan.”

The waitress’ voice broke in. “What can I get you, luv?”

“Two Cornish pasties, please. And tea?” Pell said, looking at Mel for confirmation.

She nodded. “Tea in England, of course.”

“And trifle for dessert,” he added. “You really must get to know English trifle, Mel, it’s delicious. Now we can talk,” he said as the waitress left. “You first.”

“There’s not much to tell. I live in New York, and I work in advertising. I’m combining my vacation with a

special project for my boss. He wants everything I can find about the Elgin Marbles, for a new account. And what are you working on here?"

"Advertising, eh?" He smiled at her shyly, a bit uncomfortable at talking about his ambitious plan. "I'm planning a book on the Crusades, about an ancestor of mine who fought with Richard the Lion Heart, back around 1190."

"How cool! That sounds like a great project. Tell me more," Mel coaxed.

"His name was also Richard, Sir Richard de Perceval. I hope I'm not boring you." Pell heard himself sounding like a lecturer, but was carried away by his subject. As Mel shook her head No, he went on, "Not much is known about my Richard, but there are family legends about his courage and..."

"But your name isn't Percival. You said you were Byron Pelham." Mel broke in. "How is Sir Richard your ancestor?"

"Oh, my grandmother was born a Percival, and it's my middle name. Gran Maud married a Pelham and Dad is her son." He was embarrassed to realize how he'd been monopolizing the conversation. "But enough about me. You haven't said much about your history."

"I don't know very much. I can't match your line back to the twelfth century. I can only go as far back as my grandfather – on my mother's side. He came from Norway as a boy."

"Oh!" Pell's life was a far cry from the tribulations of immigrants. "Tell me what you're looking for."

"I'm just beginning my research. I'm not even sure where it'll take me. I thought it would be fun to come to England and stay with a friend." She shrugged. "My boss has this new account and wants to cinch it with special promotions about the Elgin Marbles. Thinks a touch of art and history would lend elegance and pizzazz. So when he

heard I was planning a vacation in London, he gave me an extra week to work at the British Museum and bring home lots of ideas for him.”

“Well, you know the Elgin Marbles are right here in the Museum. They built a special room to house them. We’ll go see them on our way back from lunch.”

“That would be great, but actually, it’s stuff about the Marbles that I need, copy we can use in promotions. And pictures, lots of pictures. It’s okay. I found a bunch of stuff I can work with.” She hitched her chair closer. “But I want to hear more about your family. I’m fascinated that you can go back to the twelfth century.”

Pell needed little urging. His heritage had fired his imagination since childhood. “Actually, they go back much further than the Crusades. A Perceval invaded England with William the Conqueror, and was well rewarded. But the family charts at my Gran Maud’s house start in the ninth century in Normandy.”

“Normandy!” Mel was getting more impressed every minute. “But I thought they were English?”

“Well, most of them have been since 1066, after the Conquest. They did very well in England, and there are lots of stories about them. They piled up titles and estates, married well, and by the 18th century, when John Perceval, the second Earl of Egmont, had those charts made, they owned huge properties in Ireland as well as in different parts of England.” Pell’s head had been filled with Percival stories all his life.

Mel’s eyes were wide with interest as she listened, twisting an end of her hair, a favorite fidget. “The Earl of Egmont? Is he part of your family too? They sound very grand to me.”

“Yes, it was one of the Percival titles, but they weren’t all that grand. A few years ago I checked them out at the Society of Genealogists here in London. It seems

that even though they were smart about acquiring wealth they were pretty dumb about holding on to it. By the twentieth century, most of their estates had been sold to developers. And now the earldom is vacant – which means nobody wants the title, because all the money that went with it is long gone.” He fell silent, still uncomfortable about tooting his own horn. “Oh, there are lots of great tales – even a family curse. I’ll tell you some of them one day. But it’s you I want to know about. Where does your family live? In New York?”

“Oh, no, I’m from the Midwest. Momma and Poppa live in Wisconsin, but I haven’t been back for quite a while. I’m afraid I sort of outgrew Wisconsin. I didn’t have a great childhood. Papa was always losing his job, or throwing it up for a great new opportunity that never panned out. So we moved around a lot, and I was always having to make new friends.”

“That’s tough,” Pell said with sympathy. “You miss the best part of school that way.”

“I know. I hated it. When Poppa finally decided to settle down they managed to buy the little store where he was working, and now they spend all their time running it – long hours and just getting by. They never had the time to do stuff with me, or the money to help me with college. I’ve been on my own ever since high school. Now I share a flat in New York with a college friend – or I did until last month, when Joanne got married and moved to Boston.”

Pell clutched at a clue. “Ah, a fellow English major, I guess.”

“Afraid not,” Mel said ruefully. “I could only manage a couple of years at a junior college, taking business courses, practical for making a living. I never finished, anyway. Dropped out from sheer boredom. I don’t have a lot of patience.” She looked up and laughed by way of apology.

“But I had to make a living,” she went on. “So now

I work in advertising. I seem to be good at it. And what do you do? Do you write for a living?"

"No," he said. "Nothing so romantic, though I do hope to write books. I'm an English professor at Appalachian State in North Carolina, up in the Blue Ridge Mountains. I've been spending my sabbatical semester in London, working in the Reading Room, but I have to be back in June to teach summer school. How about you? How long are you here for?"

"I managed to get four weeks altogether – and nearly half a week gone already." Mel sighed at the thought.

As they were walking back to the Reading Room, Pell said, "If this is your first trip here, there's so much you ought to see. I'd be glad to show you London. It's one of my favorite places in the world."

"Oh, I'd love that, thanks." Mel was excited by Pell's offer, since it meant he wanted to see more of her. "I've always wanted to see London. I've read so many English novels, it almost feels like home already. It took me quite a while to save up the money for this trip, so I want to make the most of it."

As they left the museum together at the end of the afternoon, Pell found he didn't want the day to end. "May I take you home?" he asked. "Where are you staying?"

"Oh, it's not far. I'm sharing a friend's room at Good-enough House, here in Bloomsbury."

"Never heard of it. Sounds frightfully Old England."

As they went out into the sunny spring day, so treasured by Londoners because so rare in their damp climate, Mel explained. "It's just a plain old dormitory building, part of the University of London. It's for women grad students and scholars from the Dominions and the U.S. -- as well as

Britain. Pretty Spartan but pretty cheap. Hard to get into because people reserve rooms way ahead. But I'm bunking with my friend Sarah, who's staying there. She's an anthropologist and she's been doing research about Stone Age remains – in London and other sites.”

Mel stooped to breathe in the scent of a rosy hyacinth leaning into the path. “She also goes out of town a lot, so she got permission for me to crash in her room. She's not there much, just comes and goes. It's great for me – only a few blocks from the Museum, in Mecklenburgh Square. Sarah was the one who gave me the idea of coming to London.”

“Sounds perfect,” Pell congratulated her. “Aren't friends wonderful? I'm renting a room in my cousin Dick's flat in Bayswater. He's an actor, but his play closed, and he doesn't have a part for next season yet, so he's glad to get a few extra quid. Perhaps we'll have you to dinner one day soon, so you can see how the other half lives.”

“Sounds lovely. Will you be at the museum tomorrow? Isn't it awesome to be working in that fabulous Reading Room, in the middle of all that history?”

“It's fantastic. And what a history it is. It's been home to so many writers. Did you know Marx wrote ‘Das Kapital’ in that room?” Returning to Mel's question, he said, “Sorry, I won't be there tomorrow. It's Friday, and Dick and I are going to his family's country place for the weekend. But I'll see you Monday – in the Reading Room. Then maybe we could have dinner?”

“Oh, yes, that would be great!” She stopped to look around. “It's so pretty here!” They were crossing Russell Square, radiant with spring bloom – fragrant hyacinths and bright tulips under the rosy azalea bushes, with fading daffodils drooping among the young green of the shrubbery.

“These luxuriant Bloomsbury squares are welcome

havens among the crowded streets of London,” Pell said. “I’m sorry you missed the daffodils. Russell Square was one huge sea of gold a week ago. All these squares are filled with flowers, especially this time of year.”

“I think Bloomsbury is the prettiest part of London – so far, anyway,” Mel added, remembering how little of London she knew yet.

“Wait till you see Regent’s Park – and St. James’ – in fact all the London parks are famous for their beauty.” He flushed as he added, startled at his own boldness, “And they’re perfect for setting off your own.”

Again that glow suffused Mel’s tawny skin.

“Flatterer! You’re so gallant, Pell.”

“I never flatter,” Pell shot back. He took her arm as they crossed the street, acutely aware of the connection. “I always tell the absolute truth. I’m known for it.” He couldn’t believe his easy repartee with Mel. He tended to be tongue-tied with women at parties, thinking of brilliant retorts only hours later while brushing his teeth.

As they passed a large brick building labeled London House, Mel was explaining, “This is where the men’s dorms are, and it’s where I eat.” Then they were around the corner and at Goodenough House, an elderly three-story walkup of faded yellow stucco. To Pell’s disappointment it was time to say goodbye.

He was trying to think of a way to put off the parting moment, but Mel spoke first. “I’m about to go get some dinner at London House, ‘cause there’s no food service in this building. Do you have a date, or would you like to join me? It’s pretty good food and so cheap – a whole dinner for just a couple of pounds.”

Pell was reprieved. “That’s a great idea. I’d love to. I’m not doing a thing this evening. Are you sure guests are allowed?”

“Oh, sure.” Mel was beaming at his pleasure. “You

don't have to show a card or anything." She hesitated. "Sorry I can't ask you up. Men aren't allowed in the rooms here, Sarah says. But I need to freshen up a bit. Can I meet you in Coram Fields," she pointed, "just there across the street? In -- in about -- say, twenty minutes? It's pretty there, with benches to wait on."

"Of course. The park will be fine. Take your time."

Pell crossed the road to a rustic space in the midst of the busy city and sat contemplating this sudden twist in his prosaic life, bewildered by the feelings that drew him to this rather unexceptional woman. Not aggressive by nature, he tended to let things and people pass him by. Yet this time he knew he wanted to pursue the chance meeting further. When Mel appeared he was deep in thought, trying to figure out what it was about her that made the difference.

Standing in front of him, she announced, "Here I am," opening her arms in a pose and giggling. He looked up at her, struck dumb by how happy he was to see her, how swiftly she'd taken over his mind and senses.

The crowded refectory was noisy but the talk sounded friendly. "We'd better find a table first," Mel decided, "while there are still a few seats left."

Pell nodded and looked around. "There's a little empty one back in that corner, just for us. Let's grab it." They pushed their way through the gabby groups standing around and sank into the chairs triumphantly.

"Why don't you tell me what you want to eat?" Pell suggested, "and I'll go get our dinners while you hold down the fort here."

When he returned with their food, conversation took second place. Relishing the hearty meal of mutton chops with all the trimmings, they relaxed and chatted casually between bites. As they finished up with gooseberry tart and coffee, both were basking in a strange

contentment, reluctant to leave the table long after the food was gone.

“Do tell me more about the Reading Room, Pell,” Melanie said. “It’s such an incredible place.” She leaned forward to listen eagerly, again twisting an end of her bobbed hair.

“Isn’t it?” Pell agreed. “Well, from what I’ve read, I can tell you that the Museum building was originally a 17th-century mansion, the home of the Montagu family. The government bought it to house important collections of books and artifacts that were given to the city, like the Royal Library, for instance.” Mel was slowly nodding, absorbed in his tale. He fondly watched her intent face as he spoke.

“And as they got more treasures, and more and more people came to study and do research there, the old building became way too small, so they built the one we have now. And when they needed a bigger Reading Room, somebody had the bright idea of roofing over the central courtyard.” He smiled and spread his hands in a magician’s gesture. “They built a dome held up by a circular wall, and voila! They had a perfect reading space.”

“I just love London,” Mel enthused. “Do you suppose we’ll get to see the Queen? I’ve always liked reading about her. There are so few royalties left –”

“I doubt it,” Pell said. “She doesn’t gad about town much. Except when there’s some formal occasion, like her 25th Jubilee in ‘77, when she rides around in her gilded coach.”

“Oh, that was just two years ago. Were you in London then too?” Mel sounded envious at the idea of regular visits to England.

“No, but I saw quite a bit of the celebration on TV. My mother wanted to come because she loves pomp and ceremony, but my father was running a campaign and

couldn't get away to take her. She never travels alone."

"She sounds pretty old fashioned," Mel said with a touch of condescension. "I think women should do things on their own." She smiled a bit defensively. "I'm a feminist, and I think it's wonderful how much progress my sex is making these days. Like Margaret Thatcher. Imagine a woman getting to be Prime Minister of England!"

"Yes, that's really a first, I must say. That just happened this month. She's not the first ever," Pell qualified, "but mostly the others have been in much smaller countries. Thatcher has really broken new ground."

He saw Mel stifling a yawn. "I suppose it's time to get going," he added with a sigh. "Come on. I'll walk you home."

Since home was only around the corner, even their dawdling couldn't buy them much time. As they said goodnight on the doorstep of Goodenough House, Mel took his face in her hands for a moment, then opened her front door and stepped inside with a smile and a wave.

"Till Monday," Pell said, and walked back to Russell Square for the Underground to Bayswater, in a daze of delight.

2

All that weekend the fine weather held, a surprise gift in a chronically rainy English spring. Pell lounged about the centuries-old country house on the Thames near Hampton Court, where Dick's parents lived. Ordinarily he loved spending time there, but now his mind was in London, wondering what Mel was doing -- and with whom.

As usual, he was roped into making a fourth at the perpetual bridge game, but he was distracted. "Whatever are you thinking, Byron?" Aunt May scolded when he was her partner. "Why on earth did you trump my good king? We could have set them if you'd paid attention."

Pell apologized, but went on making stupid mistakes. Whenever he could escape he took the punt out on the river, to drift and dream of sparkling dark eyes and a flashing smile that seemed to reach deep inside his solitary spirit. Already his longing told him that he needed Mel in his life, far beyond a casual travel romance. Could he trust her seeming response to his shy advances? He wondered. Would this sudden dream of a new sun in his sky turn out to be real? He wished he could call her but didn't know how to reach her in her dorm.

Then his thoughts would veer to his parents and the cold shoulder they'd be sure to turn to a Midwesterner with no breeding or social status. As he delighted in the sunlit river and the florescent gardens along its banks, he could hear his mother's strident voice: "What an idea, Byron! You know nothing of her family or background, if any. You can't be serious. You must consider that she would be part of our family. How could she ever fit in?"

Pell himself had always been an anomaly in the robust and rather arrogant family where he had seemed an

afterthought and had always felt himself an outsider. The unspoken pride of place of his weekend hosts was all too real a reminder of the Pelham concern with class. None of the family ever paid Byron much mind -- except his grandmother, his dear Gran Maud, and his only hope in finding an ally for Mel.

Maud Percival Pelham, a patrician but down-to-earth Virginia lady, had always been the dominant figure in Byron's life. He hoped she would be the one to say, "Will she make you happy, dear boy? If you're sure she's the right one for you, don't mind about your family. All I want is to see you happily settled before I die." If Gran would back him up perhaps she could induce his parents to accept his choice. Perhaps she would see in Mel the affinities he'd felt at their first dinner together, and love her for them.

At the end of the weekend Pell returned to London and Mel. Side by side in the Reading Room once again, the two would look up from their books to smile at each other. Every day Pell would mouth: "Lunch?" and they would share more of their histories in the Museum coffee shop.

The busy refectory at London House as well would often find them deep in conversation, over dinner in their favorite corner. Mel would ask for more of Pell's stories about the deeds of dead-and-gone Percivals whose lives were so intertwined with the history of England. "They all sound so important. You must be very proud of them."

Pell laughed. "Of some of them, I guess. But only a few were really distinguished, or did something really important. One of them actually became prime minister of England, round about the War of 1812. But his name is hardly memorable."

"Prime minister! That's awesome. But why isn't he memorable?"

“Because he was pretty reactionary, and his death was hardly regretted. I’m sorry to report that his one distinction is being the only prime minister ever to be shot in the lobby of the House of Commons,” Pell reported.

“Shot? You mean like killed?” Mel was astonished. “Who could do such a thing?”

“It was quite unheroic, I’m afraid,” Pell answered. “Just a supporter who expected to be rewarded with a post and was furious at being disappointed. He was mentally unbalanced, of course, but Spencer Perceval was just as dead as if he’d died in a romantic duel over a lady.”

Their dinners always ended with Pell walking his lady home and hanging around chatting on the doorstep of Good-enough House before bidding her a reluctant farewell, which included a brief goodnight kiss. Both free of other commitments, they were spending most of their leisure hours together. But Pell wanted more.

“It’s such a nice evening,” he said one day at dinner. “Let’s go down to the river and take a boat to Greenwich.” Sailing down the placid Thames, standing together at the rail to see the Tower of London and the obsolete dockside now being gentrified into fashionable lofts and offices, Pell let his arm rest on Mel’s shoulder. As she turned to look into his face her smile gave him courage. Holding hands they strolled around Greenwich Dock, where famous old ships were moored. Pell pointed out the historic Naval Museum and beyond it the Observatory at the top of the hill.

“It was built for Charles II,” he explained. “And in it on the floor is the line from which the world’s time is measured, the zero meridian.”

“Awesome!” Mel was impressed. “You mean I could straddle it and have one foot in each hemisphere?”

On the return trip in a gathering twilight, Pell took

advantage of the shadows cast by Tower Bridge to take Mel in his arms. All his feelings were in the real kiss he had been yearning to give her. He did not think she would push him away, but he was not prepared for her passionate response. As the boat came out beyond the bridge and their lips parted, Pell glanced into his girl's face and saw only delight, and an eagerness that made his heart soar.

"Darling," she murmured, "I see another bridge ahead."

He laughed and hugged her. "Good old London Bridge. Must we wait for it?" and Mel shook her head and gave him her lips again.

As they said goodnight on her doorstep that night, when their mouths parted at last, Mel took a deep breath and said, "Tomorrow is Saturday. Shall we take a day off? You said Regent Park was special. Wouldn't it be a good day to see it, while the weather is so nice?"

Saturday was a perfect day. Now acknowledged lovers, they strolled hand in hand, watching children at play and many games of Frisbee and pick-up baseball and cricket. Queen Mary's huge rose garden was in brilliant multicolor bloom, and after lunch they went to the zoo -- not very big as zoos go, but full of interest.

"Look at the flamingos walking around," Mel said in surprise. "I wouldn't think they could live outdoors this far north."

"It's because of the Gulf Stream," Pell explained. "It brings warm water across from the Caribbean and that has a warming effect on the climate. You should see the palm trees growing in Cornwall. Can you believe London is at least ten degrees farther north than New York?"

For the first time they spent an entire day together, finishing up the evening going to see *The Mousetrap*. Agatha Christie's perennial mystery play had been

running since 1952, a phenomenon of the London theatre scene. Yet the day was still not long enough for them. They ended it dawdling on their bench in Coram Fields, kissing and hugging and savoring their growing togetherness.

“Can you come to dinner Wednesday?” Pell said next evening as they made their way across Bloomsbury to Good-enough House. “I want you to meet Dick. I also wondered if you’d like to ask your friend Sarah. Dick is unattached at the moment, and I thought it would be nice to have a foursome.”

“Super,” Mel said, smiling her delight. “I’d love to come and meet your cousin. Thanks.” She thought a moment. “I’ll have to ask Sarah. She’s in and out of town; but she did get in last night.” She hugged his arm in pleasure, then remembered something. “She’s been sort of seeing Jim Winthrop, a journalist who interviewed her when she first arrived. Still, he may be out of town on a story at the moment. I’ll ask Sarah and let you know.”

Sarah was glad to be invited. She’d been hearing a lot about Pell and was intrigued. He insisted on picking them up and bringing them to Bayswater, afraid that Mel would get lost on the Underground. “I’ll feel better if I get you.”

“But don’t you need to go home to help fix dinner?” Mel wondered. “Are you going to leave it all to Dick?”

He laughed. “There’s nothing to fix. Dick will just pick up everything at Fortnum & Mason’s. I’m sure he can manage to set the table without me. We’ll get the wine on the way.”

True to Pell’s prediction, the evening turned out a great success. Dick, always on stage, kept everybody in stitches during cocktails and the buffet meal of gourmet delicacies. Dick’s apartment was small but handsomely

furnished with heirlooms from the family home in Sussex. Despite the differences in their style, Mel found the cousins alike in many ways. Though they didn't really resemble each other, there was a family look around the mouth that she said she could recognize.

Dick was also quite taken with Sarah Spencer, a bright and forthright young woman from Toronto. "Tell me about your work," he asked Sarah. "What do you do when you go to see stone circles?" Of course he knew about these ancient megalithic remains scattered through various parts of England -- of which Stonehenge was the most famous but only one of many -- but he had seldom explored any.

"Oh, I find all sorts of things to learn about them." She turned to smile at him. "Mel says you're not in a play at the moment. Would you like to come with me next time I go? I'm planning to check out several in the Lake Country next."

At loose ends, Dick was delighted with Sarah's invitation, and the two couples were a foursome as long as Sarah was in town. They spent evenings together at theaters and music halls, or on the river. The men enjoyed showing London's famous landmarks to the newcomers, though Sarah had already done a fair amount of sightseeing before her friend's arrival.

Mel was surprised to find the late spring daylight lengthening well past ten o'clock. "It's the Gulf Stream that keeps our climate so mild," Dick explained. "If it weren't for that we'd be an arctic land."

"Oh, right, Pell explained it to me," she said. "I just hadn't thought about the late daylight part. Silly me."

This constant companionship and Mel's obvious interest emboldened Pell, though he was still shy about exploring Mel's real feelings -- and his own. Her effervescence drew the loner out, and the allure she

exuded roused a lust that surprised him. His body hungered for her even as his mind longed to understand hers, but he wasn't aggressive enough to push for greater intimacy. Fully aware of his longing and more experienced, knowing also that her vacation would be coming to an end before long, Mel decided to bring matters to a head. Jealousy was always a good stimulant.

"I need to do some shopping tomorrow, do you want to come?" she invited Pell one evening. "I have to find a gift to take home to Harry." Under Pell's insistence, she admitted that she had been seeing Harry quite a bit before she left for England. "We were dating, but it's nothing serious. I'm sure you have a lady friend at home too, don't you?"

She teased until he had to admit that he occasionally dated a French professor at his university.

"But Marie Claire means nothing to me," he insisted. "She's just a friend. Once in a while she needs an escort to academic functions, and I'm unattached. And I don't like to go to these affairs alone either. Also we both like chamber music and sometimes attend concerts together." In his effort to assure Mel that he had no ties, Pell was babbling. "Her interest in my work is the main connection. She knows about the Percival heritage in Normandy, she comes from there –" He stopped and took a deep breath. "I kind of guessed she liked me," he admitted at last, "but I have no romantic interest in her, I assure you."

Mel found her shifting moods an effective weapon. Still Pell didn't rise to her bait immediately, so Mel was driven to other tactics. They were spending the evening at the apartment; Dick and Sarah were visiting the Lake District and its stones.

"Alone at last!" Pell joked, twirling a non-existent mustache like the stock villain of old silent movies. "Come to my arms, me proud beauty."

But Mel chose to be coy. "It's so warm tonight," she complained, moving restlessly about the room. "It's cooler here by the window."

As Pell followed, she suddenly decided she wanted a cold drink from the kitchen. His mind already in the throes of infatuation, his growing frustration finally exploded.

"What's the matter with you?" he lashed out, grabbing her by the arms. "Do you care about me or not? I thought your feelings were the same as mine. Are you just a tease, offering your lips or withholding them, as the mood takes you? You're driving me mad, Mel. What do you want from me?" He flung himself away from her and strode across the room to drop into an armchair to sulk.

Now Mel was ready to be her own sweet self again. She ran and plumped down on his knees, throwing her arms around him. "Oh, Pell, I don't want to withhold anything from you. I was only afraid you might think me too forward in showing my feelings." She leaned against him to press a fervent kiss on his lips. "You never said -- I want ..."

But Pell didn't get to hear what she wanted. His mouth covered hers and returned her kiss with rising passion, his tongue seeking, his hands clutching, his ardor swelling.

"Oh, love, do you want what I want?" he whispered against her mouth. "What I've wanted for days and days. Mel darling, do you want me?"

She pulled her head back and stared unsmiling into his eyes, then leaned against his ear and whispered, "Yes."

Overcoming this last hurdle released Pell's hunger, and he stood up, holding her in his arms. Now in his turn he looked hard into her eyes. "Do you mean it, Melly? Do you really want me as I want you? I must know. Are you

sure?”

Her arms twined around his neck, she nibbled the ear beneath her mouth and said it again: “Yes, yes, darling, yes, I want you as much as you want me. I’ve wanted you since that first day when we bumped heads. Of course I’m sure.”

Pell carried Mel into his bedroom, and they undressed each other, their haste growing as their bodies emerged. Half stripped, they fell back across the bed tearing at the last underclothes, too needy to wait for caresses, coupling with an urgency that drove them insatiably, until the final surge left them spent and sated.

Pell felt he was in the throes of a force of nature more intense and unruly than anything he had ever experienced. They lay together in a quiet joy that neither was eager to break, breathing deeply and touching contentedly.

Eventually Pell took a deep breath and faced his partner, love and pleasure written on his face. “You’re wonderful, Melanie Block,” he said fervently. “I’ll never stop wanting you.”

She smiled at him, a slow satisfied smile, like a cat’s purring, and said, “Oh, darling, that’s what I’ve been wanting almost since we met.” She kissed him and cuddled against his chest with a sigh of pure content.

As their bodies relaxed, their minds took over, aware they now had a whole new set of problems. “Oh, darling,” Pell said, “I’ve still got at least a couple of weeks’ work in the Reading Room. When do you leave?”

“I’ve got to give up my room at Goodenough House next Friday. Sarah’s reservation runs out then and she’s going on to Scotland.” Mel’s mournful eyes were brimming. “And my flight is the same day. What can we do?”

“We’ll think of something, sweetheart. How can

we bear to part just when we're so – so -- so close?
Unthinkable! But don't worry. I'll work out something. I
promise."

Determined to engineer a way out, Pell said,
"Leave it all to me, darling."

And they returned to the business at hand,
renewing their exploration of their new connection.

After much thought, Pell buttonholed his cousin on
Dick's return to town the next day. "Dick, I need a very
big favor. Mel has to give up her room at Goodenough
House in a few days, and I'm not through at the Museum.
But I want her in London till I'm finished, so I must find
her a place to stay." As Dick started to speak, Pell held up
his hand. "I know we don't have room for her here, but
could you speak to your cousin Deirdre for me and ask her
if she could put Mel up for a week or two, till I'm ready
to leave? Then we could go back to the States together."

Dick was speechless for a long moment. Of course
he knew Pell was seeing a lot of this woman, but he had
no idea that things had gone so far.

"Are you sure you want to do this, old boy?" he
asked. "Are you getting serious about Mel? I suppose I
could speak to Deirdre if you really need for me to, though
it might be a bit awkward." He hesitated for a long
moment. "I think you know we'd been seeing each other,
and we broke it off only
a few weeks ago. So I'm pretty much persona non grata
with her just now. But if this is really important to you ..."

"Sorry, I didn't know you and Deirdre had been
dating," Pell said. "Thought you were a bit too closely
related for that."

"No, no, we're something twice removed. We're
what they call 'kissing cousins'." He grinned wickedly.

"Oh, I see." Pell wouldn't pick up the gauntlet. He
turned back to his own problem and went on earnestly,
"But you're still talking, I know. And this really is very

important to me, Dick. I confess, I'm in love with the woman --we're in love. And I don't want to lose her. When I'm done here I'm going to stay in New York with her till my sabbatical is over. By the time I have to go back to North Carolina to teach summer school, I'm hoping I can persuade Mel to come south with me."

"In love?" Dick said in surprise. "Are you sure, Pell? She's an attractive woman, and a lot of fun, but she's so --her background is so different, and ... Well, I just want you to be sure you're really compatible before you commit yourself. You're not thinking of marrying Mel, are you, old boy?" He looked at his cousin with concern. "You've always been so deliberate and cautious about things, and this time you're going so fast and furiously ..."

"I know what you mean, chum," Pell admitted. "I've always sort of waited for things to come to me rather than go out and look for trouble, you know. But this is different. Mel is very unlike me, she's so mercurial, it's hard to keep up with her moods sometimes. But she rouses me out of my natural stodgy state and ... well, I just feel that with her life would be lively and exciting, a life I'd never be able to have without her."

He looked up at Dick with a sheepish grin. "I'm really in love, old man, deeply in love. And I don't want anything to go wrong before we get things settled. I don't know about marriage, it's too soon, but I'm sure we both want to be together. We're wonderful together. She's so exciting. I never knew it could be like this." His eyes begged for help. "Will you please talk to Deirdre for me?"

Deirdre was unexpectedly gracious about opening her home to Pell's girl. Now he just had to persuade Mel. He laid out his plan to her that evening, on their bench in Coram Fields, which had become their second home.

"You really can't go home before me, darling. I'm not used to having you yet. I couldn't stand a separation.

Could you?" He punctuated the question with a lingering kiss before he went on.

"Dick talked to his cousin Deirdre, and she'll be glad to put you up after you lose your room. Couldn't you wire your company to give you a few days' grace?" He took her hands in his, trying hard to convince her. "You could say you've caught the flu or something. Then we could go home together and I could stay with you in New York until summer school starts. Please, Melly, please do it for me, love."

"But it's all so sudden, honey. And what happens when you have to go back to Boone?"

"By then I hope you'll want to come back with me," he blurted out, though he'd meant to work up to that part gradually. "Don't you want to be with me as much as I do with you?"

Mel was taken aback by the finality of Pell's elaborate plan. "You know, darling, all my life I've shied away from commitment. I've had a few romances, I told you that," she admitted. "But each time I've 'fallen in love' I've enjoyed the romance – until it turned serious and the man wanted marriage, home and family. Those ties frightened me. Love is easier when you know you can always walk away."

She knew what Pell was really saying. He wanted her to give up her job, her apartment, all the hard-won symbols of her independence. Yet she wanted him, and she knew he could not give up his organized life to live in New York with her. "It sounds wonderful, darling, but are you sure Deirdre really wants me? Are you sure that's what you really want me to do? Will you really stay in New York with me? You know that sooner or later we'll have to separate."

Pell's arms went around her, hugged her tight to his chest. "No, we won't. Come home with me, to Boone. I have an apartment just off campus, I only teach a few

hours a day, and we can be really together. You'll love the mountains, it's so beautiful there."

She bent back to look deep into his eyes. "Go to Boone with you? Leave my job, my home? Do you know what you're asking me, Pell? You want me to give up my whole life and live yours? Are you sure you'd be happy? And would I be happy? I'm a city girl, you know. North Carolina --Boone --they seem so far away from everything. How do I know you won't get tired of me -- or I won't get tired of you ...?" She giggled. "I'm not actually known for my patience. I do change my mind now and then. Do you think ...?"

Pell took her arms and held her out from him. "So many questions. Oh, Melly. Nobody knows what will happen in the future. I only know I need you now. I need for us to be together. I don't change my mind and I'm a very patient man and I won't get tired of you." He pulled her close and hugged her tight as he coaxed.

"At least, let's try it and see what happens. Let's start by going back to the States together. Deirdre is delighted to have you, so don't worry about that. You arrange to get an extra week off at work, and let's both work hard to finish up at the Reading Room. I can go on with my research in New York, you know. You have very good libraries there. Let's just stop thinking up problems and concentrate on enjoying being together. Will you, Mel?"

Mel sighed a deep sigh and tipped up her head for a kiss. "All right, love. No matter how it comes out, I know I want us to be together too. And you're trying so hard, and you're wonderful to have worked things out so well. How can I say 'No'?"

Once things were settled, Pell was on Cloud Nine. Despite their resolve to work hard, the rest of their stay in England was mostly one long holiday. There was so much to see and do.

They spent their last weekend with Dick's family at the house on the Thames. Mel was at her best and their hosts were delighted with her – and she was enchanted with the place. She reveled in the luxury of having a boat right at the bottom of the garden, and they went out on the river every chance they got.

As they drifted along the willow-hung banks past verdant lawns and gardens in riotous bloom, she sighed happily. “This is my idea of heaven, darling, and sharing it with my lover makes it more heavenly still.”

Pell even managed to coordinate their flights so they could travel together and that made everything perfect. They arrived in New York tired but at peace with the world, ready for the future and its possibilities.

3

They were hardly settled in Mel's apartment, a funky but convenient furnished flat near the East River in the east eighties, before Pell again began his campaign. Determined to convince his lover to give up her job and come to North Carolina with him, he took advantage of every chance to coax her to think about his idea. He was spending his days at the Main Public Library on 42nd Street, but always made sure he was home when she arrived, tired and hot and grumpy.

The day she turned in all her work in London, she got home in a state. "I worked so hard in London and found so much good material. And I was so sure that my boss would be so pleased he'd let me write the copy for the first promotion," she complained. "But he took all my stuff and wouldn't even talk about it. 'Thanks, this looks good,' was all he said. 'I should find plenty of material here.' And then he told me he's going to write the copy himself. I'm disgusted with the whole project. I pinned all my hopes on it."

This was a perfect opening for Pell. "I told you there's no future in your job, darling," he said. "Why don't you leave it and come south with me? You've told me so often that it's just bread-and-butter work, and your boss just proved it"

He put his arms around her to sympathize. "And there's no way I could earn a decent living here in New York. I'd have to start at the bottom. At ASU in Boone I'm a tenured associate professor, with a future and enough income for us both, if not luxury. So you wouldn't have to work. You could just enjoy life – do whatever you want. The mountains are so beautiful, with fabulous vistas everywhere you look. And it never gets hot and muggy