

HAPPY DAYS!

~~rugs, alcohol, mood lighting, speedboats, mink coats, cities and poetry. So, please, no sniggering at the bower birds' attempts to get laid.~~

~~But Niv and Johnny had gone far beyond trying to turn the heads of a few of Earl Carroll's showgirls by now.~~ We went up to Mulholland for a test-drive and found that Len was both utterly nerveless and sure-fingered, and I bombed around the drive's long curves, honking away, at something close to the Chevy's top speed. This had the makings of something. In fact, we decided that what we really needed was Dietrich's Cadillac, which was so long that her chauffeur, Briggs, was seldom in the same county as his employer, and which was known as "the Most Beautiful Car in America." Yes, the Most Beautiful Human Being on Planet Earth looking at the Most Beautiful Girls in the World from the Most Beautiful Car in America, chauffeured by an ape. Poetry. And it could stand further improvement, Johnny argued. It wouldn't necessarily be overdoing things if we drove over to Griffith Park zoo and picked up Jackie the lion, who was really quite tame. His trainer was a drunk and a curmudgeon, but always in need of a few bucks. Yeah, Jackie, everyone agreed, Jackie would round things out nicely, leaning out of the passenger window, his mane streaming in the breeze, with me working the horn. Jackie and Cheeta—a dream team.

Dietrich, however, would never lend us her Cadillac. But what about Fairbanks? *Fairbanks!* Fairbanks's open-top Rolls! Now this was approaching some kind of perfection!

Once Doug had been persuaded, after lengthy negotiations, to allow Johnny and Niv to borrow the Rolls ("Not you, if you don't mind, David, you've had a couple already, haven't you?," "Not at all, Doug. I'm merely on scintillating form," "Have a cigar instead. And get her back in time for lunch"), we drove it carefully out of the gates to meet up with the two dwarfs, who were waiting with Jackie

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around the corner. The plan was to stop by Joan Crawford's house, which was just down the road, then Mayer's, and then look in at Summit Drive, where we could visit Chaplin, David Selznick and Ronnie Colman, before making a leisurely procession down the length of Hollywood Boulevard and into legend.

Dearest humans, gentle readers, you're an easy crowd. Even without my own little touches (golf visor and cigar), Jackie and I would have been a hit, just because we were animals. I have to be honest here. If I've been fortunate enough to make a few people laugh along the way, and maybe even make them think a little, my own hard work and talent have played their part. But most of my success, perhaps, or much of it . . . some of it, anyway—let's say a *fraction* of my success, ten percent, we can agree on that—can be put down to my simply being an animal. No other species loves other animals the way you do.

I suppose that the more I was getting out and about in Hollywood, the more I was getting to see your love for animals. Everybody shared their mansions with dogs; everybody had aviaries; there were horses and snakes and turtles; there was a zoo in Luna Park and one in Griffith Park. There was an ostrich farm up on Mission Drive, right next to the California Alligator Farm, where the alligators were so adored that young adult humans would kidnap them on an almost nightly basis.

I was beginning to realize the scale of the whole project. How many *Forest Lawns* had there been? On the walls in several of my fellow stars' lovely homes, you would often see photographs that showed your host next to the carcass of some violent marine predator. Since a mass rescue of fish was impossible on the same scale as with us land-dwellers, humans were obviously removing as many of the more dangerous predators as possible from the sea to protect the majority of smaller fish. And then there were the white horses

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on whiskey labels and camels on cigarettes and big-eared mice in the movies and all the rest of it.

I mean, when Strickling wanted to promote Mae West's *It Ain't No Sin*, he hired a couple hundred parrots to perch in theater lobbies around the country and recite the picture's title, which, unfortunately, the Hays Office nixed at the last moment as too suggestive, forcing a change to *I'm No Angel*. But the birds went on and sang, *It ain't no sin, it ain't no sin*. They were the Parrots That Couldn't Be Gagged. Nobody remembered the picture, but you couldn't go to a party for weeks without people toasting those parrots.

And if the Dream Factories rated your work, you could get away with anything. When Emma, the queen of the MGM elephants, seriously disagreed with her trainer on the set of *Tarzan Finds a Son!*, she picked him up with her trunk, threw him down and broke his back. She wasn't even put on suspension. The other elephants took their cues from Emma, so the studio closed ranks and blamed the trainer, just as they had when Gable ran over a woman called Tosca Roulieu on Sunset Boulevard in September '33, for which John Huston took the rap. Oops. Well, I've mentioned it now, and as the inquest showed, Mrs. Roulieu was at fault, stepping without looking into the torrent of traffic that famously chokes Sunset at two in the morning. On the other hand, Maurice the lion was never seen again after he mauled dear old Charles Bickford during the filming of Fox's *East of Java*. He may have been an animal but he just hadn't done enough to keep his profile high. That was always, always the key to surviving.

Anyway, once the six of us had loaded ourselves into the Rolls, and Niv had installed the smoking cigar between my teeth, Johnny was overtaken by conscience about Doug. Fairbanks was simply the biggest practical joker there was in Hollywood. He would feel

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betrayed when he found out what we'd done with his car without including him.

"We can't possibly leave him behind," Johnny said. "We have to have Doug."

So we set off back through Doug's tall gates and down his drive, with me honking the Rolls's distinguished English-accented horn to alert the old King of Hollywood to our approach. And there Doug was, descending the steps at the front of the house with his three-hundred-pound English bull mastiff, Marco Polo, bouncing along behind him, and the floppy-hatted pale Lady Sylvia, his distinguished English wife, peering out from the portico at our racket. Unfortunately the joke-shop cigar that Doug had palmed off on Niv exploded violently in my face at that moment, causing me to panic and kick Len in the head rather forcefully. We swung across the lawn, accelerating, since my panic-stricken lashing-out had sort of jammed Len's body against Chet's, trapping him against the pedals in the well. Niven was shouting, "Jump!" and Johnny, "Left, Len, left!" as we veered back onto the drive and were brought to a sudden and horribly percussive halt by Johnny's beloved Chevy, which was parked meekly on the gravel driveway in front of the house.

Niven, floppy with booze, was unscathed. So was Jackie, thrown clear and onto his feet. Len and Chet sustained injuries they managed to drink their way through over the course of that afternoon. I was flung through the air, twirling lazily over the mashed Chevy, over the herringbone bricks of the terrace and the urns of pansies and geraniums, over Sylvia's elegant white hand holding down her wide-brimmed hat, the sticks of charcoal lying on her sketchbook, where Doug's face was taking shape, unshocked as yet by the whole thing. And as I rotated and awaited death, my whole life passed before my eyes.

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And you know what? It wasn't a precious moment—the whole thing was poisoned by the fact that I knew I was about to die. It hit me—with more force than the stucco façade of Doug and Sylvia's house was just about to—how terrible and pointless it would be to live life thinking that death wasn't just a danger to be continuously outwitted, but an *inevitability*. And I so wanted not to die! How would Tarzan and Jane cope on the escarpment? For a long, bitter moment I sailed over the herringbone bricks, over a little iron-railinged terrace and through the open windows of the Fairbankses' master bedroom, making a splashdown on an extravagantly soft king-size bed—in which, four years later, poor dear Doug was cruelly snuck up on by his heart and killed while he slept.

Well, Niven is well known for embellishing his anecdotes—absolutely notorious for it. “Your stories lose nothing in the telling, David,” as a skeptical listener (I won't name him, to spare his blushes) once grumbled after yet another phantasmagorical punch line at one of Lionel Atwill's weekly sex parties up at Pacific Palisades.

“No, but yours do,” Niv responded.

However, it's a question of taste, really—for my part, it spoils a good story if you can't believe it really happened like that. Niv would doubtless tell you that “After a silence, Doug looked us up and down and said, ‘Sylvia, tell Cook we will be six for lunch’ ” or “I exited the vehicle and fixed Doug with my most apologetic expression: ‘Bit tricky to park, your car.’ ” But of course it wasn't like that.

I scampered dizzily off the bed and out onto the little terrace to see Doug and Sylvia and the pointlessly barking dog rushing towards the wrecked Rolls, which the two dwarfs and a bleeding Johnny were exiting in various degrees of unsteadiness. Niven was rather groggily complaining to Doug that “It's a bit tricky to park, your car.”

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Johnny could stand, thank God. He could speak. He was saying, “Oh, no, no, no, no, where’s Jackie? How’s Jackie? Is Jackie OK? Len, are you all right? Chet?”

I must add, for the sake of strict accuracy, that over the top of the whole scene was the sound of one of the tour guides who plagued the dreamers’ houses on a daily basis inaccurately describing through a loudspeaker to a busload of day-trippers the lives that were lived behind the creeper-clad walls. Very faintly, a metallic voice was in the middle of a description of the unhappy ending of Doug’s marriage to Mary Pickford: “. . . tragically the fairy tale couldn’t last, and what seemed like an ideal union was doomed to . . .”

“Oh, thank Christ, Jackie!” said Johnny. “He’s OK. Oh, thank God.” Jackie was padding swiftly away through the shrubs, looking kind of mournful, almost tearful, as cats can after a shock. “Look, he’s fine, he’s moving fine . . . Chet, you’re . . . Where’s Cheeta?”

Jumping up and down and windmilling my arms above my head, I gave my most resonant pant-hoot and let it curdle into a shriek of delight. I’m here! It’s me, Cheeta! The faces of the humans on the drive turned up toward me and I gave them a backflip of joy and, what the hell?, stood on my hands. I could see that Johnny was OK—a small cut on his hairline bleeding more than it really meant. Oh, lucky, lucky, *lucky* me. It’s hard to die when Mr. Tarzan is around.

“Jesus Christ, Johnny, we are *lucky* men,” said Niven.

But Tarzan was already responding to my pant-hoot with an immense yodel, “*Aaaahhheeeeyeeeyeeeyaaaahhhheeyeeeyee-aaaaah . . .*” before laughter overtook him, then Niv, the dwarfs and finally the Fairbankses.

And then Doug said the immortal words, “Sylvia, tell Cook we’ll be six for lunch.”