

A Dull Sound of Revelry

IT'S my friend Janet on the phone. "I do think," she pronounces, "that we should set the children a Good Example."

Quite. Though what else does she think we've been doing all these years?

"This dance we're giving them on Saturday night. I do feel that if we all went and had the odd lesson—just to polish up—"

"Good idea," I enthuse, grimacing.

—so I rang the Studio and arranged for us all to go on Wednesday night. A private lesson, just the six of us."

It's time to run for cover. "Tom," I invoke, "Tom just wouldn't hear of it! He'd as soon—"

"Actually Harry mentioned it to Tom and he said Tom seemed quite keen."

"Splendid," I bleat, betrayed.

So here we are at the Studio, emerging diffident as debutantes from the snugery of Ladies Cloaks on to the glacial expanse of floor, to where our husbands huddle, clot-like, round the business-like figure of Miss Delacour, in trim grey flannel costume without costume jewellery.

"Bring on the dancing girls!" shouts Brian, bravely waggish.

A shudder undulates Miss Delacour. Maybe because it's cold I wish I had worn my woollen suit.

"Gentlemen, take your partners!"

Tom advances sheepishly towards me. He knows his place.

"Hand in the small of partner's back."

Good, it's found, though it's harder than it used to be. . . "Girl's hand resting lightly on partner's shoulder. That's right, girls. No, hold her closer, much closer than that. Now, boys, how do you guide your partner?"

A silence. "With the stomach," suggests Harry.

"Perhaps," concedes Miss Delacour, "in Latin-American dancing. Yes, the stomach. And —?"

Silence.

"The pressure of the hand on the small of the back, surely?"

"Yes," they admit, relieved. Pity, because all three of them are in a better position to lead with their stomachs than they used to be.

"Now, the boys initiate all the steps, the girls merely follow. So you'll understand, girls, if I seem to be concentrating on the boys? Right, now girls on the outside, boys on the inside. We'll start with the Valeta. Music, please, Mr Heppenstall."

Goodness, I haven't done the Valeta since I went in a buggy to that shearing-shed hop twenty-odd years ago.

"Why the Valeta?" I hiss to Janet.

"The boys learn it at school."

"Why hasn't Dr Beeby done something about it?"

The music rises from the radiogram in a thin wail, like an attenuated Indian Love Call.

"Seventy-eight!" rebukes Miss Delacour.

Ah, that's better. It all comes back to me. Step-kick, step-kick, slide, slide. Step-kick, step-kick, slide, slide. Tom gets over-confident and kicks with abandon.

"Save your strength," I scathe. "You're not at the teen-age hop yet."

Fifteen minutes of Valeta and there's another social accomplishment safely in the bag.

"And now," announces Miss Delacour "the Modern Waltz. I'll take the boys



"I'm drifting, as light as thistledown—I always knew I was a born dancer"

first for this. Girls, perhaps you could be copying the diagrams on the wall to use for your homework."

I cross the steppe to the far wall, and gaze entranced at the representation of footsteps relentlessly following one another, solid black for male, striped for female, laboriously hugging the Line of Dance. Now if I were training to be a policewoman I could use that. As Miss Delacour reminded us, all we have to do is follow. Now those blacks, a narrow eight? Pointed toes . . . a gigolo type. And the striped footprints? That's me, P.C. Botthamley, padding tirelessly after in my corrugated rubbers . . .

"Mr Heppenstall?" It's Miss Delacour, cooeying from her corner. "Would you try Mrs Botthamley for the Modern Waltz?"

Poor Mr Heppenstall (yes, he would just about fit those shoes) disentangles himself reluctantly from the partner with whom he is obviously destined to win the National Ballroom Dancing Championship and advances upon me.

Silly of me. Of course the black steps were pursuing the striped ones.

Gingerly he puts a hand in the small of my back.

"I'll come quietly," I remark.

"Pardon?" he asks.

We dance. "Blue Smoke / Goes drifting by / Deedeeedee / Dee Dee." I'm drifting too, light as thistledown. I always knew I was a born dancer. I swivel my eyes sideways from the Line of Dance to see the charming picture I make in the wall-length mirror.

Oh dear, I knew it was a mistake to wear a sheath dress. Hastily I tuck in my tail, find my stomach contacting my partner's and withdraw, embarrassed.

"Pardon," he acknowledges.

We dance.

"You follow very well," he approves.

"Have you done the Modern Waltz before?"

Modestly I explain that I learnt it thoroughly at dancing class twenty-five years ago.

"But that couldn't have been the Modern Waltz," he queries.

"Son," I am tempted to reply, "we even had motor-cars," but I am undergoing a reverse at the time and have to concentrate.

"Forward, side, together, forward, side, together" chants Miss Delacour to her boys. "Forward, turn, together. Back, turn, together. Yes, it's coming!"

"Blue Smoke" has finished drifting. Mr Heppenstall scurries gratefully to the radiogram. Deserted, I sink on to a bench inhospitable as Naxos and light a cigarette. Ashtray? Ah yes, that little cask filled with sand and thus purged of any association with bacchanalian revelry. The other husbands plod sternly with their wives, but Tom

remains alone in his far corner, dancing in step with the little diagram held in front of him, like a bandsman minus his instrument.

"That's a good boy!" bellows Miss Delacour from her large corner. Tom misses a beat, startled at the unfamiliar familiarity. It's a phrase we never have occasion to use at home. She glides towards me. "There's no reason," she enthuses, "why your husband shouldn't be a first-class dancer. He's got Application. All he needs is Encouragement."

He won't get it from me, I decide. Expertise at ballroom dancing is not, I consider, either necessary or indeed desirable for a father of seven.

"And now"—Miss Delacour claps her hands. "And now—there's just a quarter of an hour left—the Cha-Cha."

Whacko! I leap to my feet, casting off my cardigan, ready to quaff this beaker full of the warm south. Latin America, here I come!

"Girls in a line. Now—after me. A five-beat. Forward, back, Cha-cha-cha. Back, forward, cha-cha-cha."

In another corner the boys are chuffing busily with Mr Heppenstall.

"Mr Heppenstall, some music new please. Now, girls, as the foot goes forward swing the opposite hip. Again—forward, back, cha-cha-cha. Back, forward, cha-cha-cha."

The music starts. It's "Tea for Two" Cha-Cha.

Latin-America, I'm not coming.

Well, that's over, and some of us, especially Tom, are promising to come again, for Polishing. I huddle gratefully into my coat and trip down the narrow unlighted stairs to the warmth of the street. A coffee bar beckons, but no, we've all got to get home to the children.

"We'll have a nice cup of tea at home," says Tom cheerful, humming "Tea for Two" Cha-Cha. He opens the car door.

Automatically (I'm such a good follower) I put my left foot forward, swing the opposite hip and impale myself on the gear lever.

"Jolly helpful, I thought," he continues, unnoticing. "I've got that waltz written out. We'll run through it a couple of times at home and then go back for a check-up."

Unnoticed, I brood. Where, oh where, I ask myself, was Dionysus? No, it was definitely just that dull girl Terpsichore.

THE CRUMBS OF FATE

ACCIDENT, you might say, when the bright-young-thing

In the restaurant flicks the crumb and misses
Her target-lover, hitting the bald man's head
To everybody's amusement; but you are wrong
As second thoughts reveal: there are no kisses
To waste upon the bald man, only bread.

And nothing is accidental in his case:
Looking the part, so eager to oblige,
What else could happen to him but be butt
Of almost any joke that comes to face
His stubborn innocence? He would not rape
At the most insidious insult, offer hurt;

But, sweetly smiling, don his bowler hat,
Raise the umbrella, somehow unaware
Nothing he does could freeze the giddy laughter.
The very cut of his coat is a kind of fate—
Either too short or too long—that he will bear
From habit, not protection against weather.

Cruelty in his case is not intended:
He makes them cruel although the young are so
Blindly when groping with their fateful eyes
Across the props and crockery in their blended
Dream and unlikely world: they really know
The bald man has no right to look surprised.

—Louis Johnson