

SUMMER 1936

Elmo in PARIS



Summer, 1936 David Bruce Bozarth

*A Thoroughly Depressing Tale
of the Ape-man and Surprise Guest
in disjointed memory*

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John Clayton sipped his gin and tonic. The air was warm, heat from the marble ledge above the garden and pool wafted close, a summer day. His wife sat in the near chair, lofting a martini in stem glass, vivacious and ...

Elmo managed a smile toward the vision he loved. He loved her. Though she had put on some years his Jane, now 40, was a vision. But she had not aged, due to some special...

A grape bounced on his forehead. The She laughed at him. "You're too solemn, John!"

Clayton, appeared not a day over twenty, although well used and battered, dragged through the streets, yet was the handsome bloke seen on the Rue de la Lumière.

"Do you love me?"

He smiled, but was it whole face or merely eyes and lips?

She was the only girl for him.

Yet he had lied to her. Not today, but in the past...

He had been as the Spaniards might say "macho", and what might be said for Italians, the French or even the British... as all the peoples different from his ape upbringing might say: he had looked upon another and... and had loved her.

That drink in hand did not taste well.

He had lied yet again: She might have been his love at first sight and killed a mad ape over, but she was not the one he had fought for... the one he had...

Bad Dreams and Bad Memories!

An Atlantic liner. A rough passage. The woman! Back then he was nothing more than a rascal most ugly, endowed with muscle and feral intelligence... and yet... To have done more would have interfered, would have made him wrong, would have...

Two women continued to fever his brain. At times his introspection was confused, even to himself.

Circumstances—fortunately!—kept them apart.

She had married well. She was wonderfully cared for, almost to the point of fox-safe house, yet; Clayton had ignored an opportunity to claim the English estate that was rightfully his, and deliberately let it fall into the hands of a man whom his Jane had apparently loved. And he had regretted that she loved... And there had been this woman on the ship...

... the wife of another.

And over the rim of his glass, he looked at his wife on a Summer day in Paris with the sun gliding toward the Western Horizon. He was married. He had a son. He had a daughter. He...

Belatedly he answered:

"I love you, too."

Clayton's eye turned glassy stare as he gazed into the sky, thinking thoughts now twenty years old, refined by that sharp focus of never forgetting. He once again caught the profile of Olga, sitting quietly as she had been wont to do in the evenings.

Their romance had been unlikely. Olga belonged to another when they met, her spouse an impulsive man who routinely challenged men to duels if they happened to cast even a sidelong glance, met with violence. The odds of that behavior caught up with the Count and Elmo had been the better duelist.

This before Jane...

...

"Look who's here!" Jane cried, rising from the chaise like a nymph from a lily pond, elegant in form, delicious in appearance.

"It's..." she bit off the name, for reason.

Clayton rose, extending his hand to the "pirate" and his woman and their rambunctious child.

"La Diablesa," Clayton bowed over the hand of the South Seas beauty. Her eyes glittered with a 'thank you' he wished she would let go, as she hugged her man. What he had done some years back had not been much, but to have that gratitude bestowed was embarrassing.

"Lafitte." Elmo acknowledged the man, gripping a strong, calloused hand near as battered and scarred as his own. "You are an ass to expose your woman and child..."

"Shut up, John!" Jane exclaimed, dragging the gorgeous girl aside and shooing the child to the pool where her daughter sported. "Do shut up, John!"

The ex-American, a tall, broad-shoulder rough character agreed. "She's right, Clayton. Do shut up. I have business in Paris and, these days, it is almost as dangerous to leave the family at home as to bring them along," the man said.

John Lafitte, renowned of the South Seas and still sought by the American Navy, was a pirate most vicious and unsavory, but of their mutual acquaintance, was a friend. Lafitte offered a grim smile and stood at the ape-man's side as the two women walked down the slope to the marble-lined pool. Lafitte's son had run ahead, shedding shoes, pants, and shirt before diving into the pool.

"Do you think of her?" Lafitte asked. "The other who might have been?"

The ape-man frowned. There was a past the two men shared which included, at one time, another "her", though not directly. Both men felt the weight of years, hard times, and dangerous adventures which, if gone wrong, would not have allowed this meet to occur.

"Olga?"

Lafitte nodded, tolerant of Clayton's measured query. "She's here. In Paris."

"Here?" Clayton asked, startled.

Lafitte glanced toward the top of the hill where the two story house lay. "There."

Two pairs of eyes viewed the silhouette of a small, well-formed woman standing beside the American's blue roadster. Though the day was warm, she was bundled in coat and scarf.

...

Two decades earlier, at the time of Count de Coude's sudden demise, Clayton had worked for the French government in northern Africa. Told of de Coude's death in a telegram from his good friend Paul D'Arnot, John Clayton, then using another name, had taken leave and rushed back to Paris to comfort the grieving widow. And the comfort turned to something else. After a reasonable time of respect for the deceased, he and Olga became man and wife in all respects *sans* the bonds of matrimony. For two years they had...

...

"Why is she here?" Elmo scrubbed his clean shaven chin with a rough hand. His words were deliberate, his grimace was immense.

"She needs you now, as you needed her then."

"Bastard," Clayton growled. He produced a silver cigarette case, a gift from Jane ten years back, and jammed a tobacco-filled cylinder in his mouth. The match flared brightly for an instant, then a wreath of blue smoke was exhaled. "What do you know of it?"

"As much as I need to know. I once coveted another's woman—" Lafitte replied "—but *I* was smart enough to keep her."

Lafitte nodded toward the dark beauty sitting beside Jane at the pool. He watched two children enthusiastically splash each other with arcs of sun-rippled water.

Elmo constricted his gaze, his fists clenched at his waist, ready to explode. "What do you *know*?"

Lafitte did not back, nor did he move in response, yet, he, too, was battle-ready. "She is not here to intrude. She knows you have the life you desire. But she needs you, John. Now."

"That is over," Clayton replied.

The American narrowed his eyes. "Is it ever *over*, Elmo? *Ever*?"

...

1916. January. Twenty-ninth. German Zeppelins bomb Paris for the first time.

"Olga!" Elmo cried, running into the apartment building where they lived. "Olga!"

Smoke. Fire. Strong thews tossed splintered wood and masonry aside. Crazy blood thumped through muscle and brain.

"Olga!"

A gasp, a sigh, a near-limp hand fluttered.

"Damn!" the ape-man cried, clearing debris, clutching the slim figure in his arms. "Olga!"

He buried his face into her throat, thrilled to hear her heart beat in his ear. He lifted her and carried the woman away from the shattered building.

"I thought you were dead!"

Her arms wrapped around his neck, her tears dampened his blue serge jacket. "I still live," she sighed. "I cannot leave you!"

"Nor I, you!" he breathed.

Later, away from the destruction, he chaffed her hands, peered into her eyes. "Darling?" he asked.

"I am well, love," she replied. "I knew you would come. I knew it with all my heart."

"Dear girl," he said. "Dear girl..." he kissed her.

"It will get worse," she said. "You must go."

"No," he said. "I—"

Her tiny fingers touched his lips. "Don't... We know it must be so. I will go to England, but I will go and you will fight the Boche and..."

"I love you, dear heart!" Clayton exclaimed. "I love you!"

Olga smiled, but it was not happiness. "I know. I *know*. But I also know we are not forever. No, John... *don't!* I just *know* this. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for this time. Thank you..."

She pushed him away.

"Thank you..."

...

Clayton looked at the woman on the hill. He sensed but ignored, yet spoke to the pirate at his side. "Damn woman!" he muttered.

Decades of life it seemed, but all accomplished in only a handful of years. Two lives lived, as one, one done, one now, one come back!

The ape-man recalled early absinthe dreams... and escaping them as the new world's reality came crashing upon him because his first world was so small, so primitive, so directionless—and this larger world had intruded, changed, driven him...

The pirate's voice brought him back. "She's dying," Lafitte said. "Cancer. Short time. A goodbye."

"What?" Elmo's head turned. He saw the truth in Lafitte's eyes. "How do you know?"

The American pirate shrugged his shoulders. "Mutual friends and enemies. Disorder and strife everywhere. Germans, Brits, French, Americans, specifically the Russian mob and all that... What can I say? She was, until recently, coupled with a gun-runner I supply and... Don't you dare, John, I'll kill you!" Lafitte's hand hovered near his jacket lapel when Elmo savagely turned.

The pirate's voice hardened. "She was happy. He is dead. She's come to Paris to die. You didn't think she would

be yours in loneliness forever, did you?"

Elmo had wondered what might have been if he had not wound up in Central Africa during the Great War, that land where he was raised by Great Apes and had been master of the jungle. But that life had happened and before that the "all but married" had occurred. Olga, the Russian woman of his heart, the first...

Lafitte, sensing conflict abated, grabbed a glass and filled it with whatever splashed with a kick. "Been there, done that, got it right, glad I did..." he offered the glass in salute, "But you, dear friend of the politics, arms, foreign policy, world order we do not wish... we... you... Damn it, I know you have a life now, but we are in different days, John..."

"These days," the ape-man growled with passion, "you best ignore!"

"Okay," the American turned pirate replied. "Where are you going with your life? It is damn obvious you aren't English, or American, or... What are you going to do with your time? Hitler is here and there in Europe and Mussolini is off the..."

The ape-man relaxed. Some battles are best fought with words and emotions, not tooth and nail and brawling.

"Johnny, I don't know what I'm going to do. I raised one son by jungle default and there's a daughter down there with your kid and my wife and yours... what the hell am I going to do? That last war near killed me and for most of that I thought my wife had been murdered... broke my... What the hell are you doing here anyway?"

Lafitte looked toward the hilltop and the lone woman standing there. Elmo looked. And remembered.

The tortured life Elmo had chosen had not lacked for adventure and Olga had inherited her husband's riches. After the Great War she lacked for nothing and after she pushed him away they had lost contact. And he had secured Jane and a Lordship and...

"It's all been shit," Clayton peevishly filled a glass for himself. "Shit."

"That's a load of farmer's friend," Lafitte replied. "You know that. She asks nothing. Just wants to say goodbye."

The pirate turned, brow arched, a dark-lashed eye-lid winked. "One time you gave me unsolicited advice—exactly when I most needed it. Consider the favor returned. Though, I do admit my life is not as complicated as yours..."

Clayton's face suddenly crimsoned. Ethiopia, Italians, this brash American gun-runner... and that unexpected embarrassed reaction irritated him. He stubbed out the cigarette. "Damn woman!"

"All of them!" Lafitte grinned. "Bless their little warm, conniving, surviving hearts! Every one of them smarter than you or I."

The American put down his glass. "Do what moves you. I'm going to join the girls." The pirate strode down the grass-covered slope without looking back.

Elmo, once known as an "ape man", had all the skills of a wild animal plus the intelligence of a well-educated human. Yet; now this man of enormous skills was momentarily indecisive because an American he respected had intruded on his family with a conundrum from his past. The last thing John Clayton desired was more drama in his life.

Nonetheless—there on the hill—a black silhouette in coat and veil...

...

Her fractured voice greeted the ape-man as he approached:

"She's lovely, Jean... You lucky man!"

His grey eyes narrowed under a furrowed brow. She had whispered a name he once used when they lived in Paris those years ago. Elmo's voice, still unrefined, even after years of civilization—never smooth—rumbled in warning.

"Die, woman!" Then he said softly, "You are in my thoughts every day. I still love you."

There was an infectious laugh, almost as pretty as the others in memory. "You continue to say the sweetest things, dear heart!"

Olga reached out and linked an arm through his. There were no titles between them now. Only memories. She leaned her veiled head against his massive chest and trembled.

"I will die, Jean. Soon. Promise. Do not be angry, I made our friend bring me. I hope you do not mind, *Mon chéri*. I had to say goodbye."

"I don't want that!" Elmo inaudibly exclaimed, gently embracing her. His hands discovered how frail were her bones, how little flesh she carried. If the breeze picked up she might be born away! His arm went about her. "I don't want that at all!"

Her withered lips caressed his sun-browned cheek. "I keep telling you, Jean, you can't have everything your way!"

His laugh in return was like a knife through his gut. His eyes itched, but no tears flowed. He kissed her.

"Bitch." He growled, meaning none of that. She laughed, knowing what he meant, and smiled brightly when he said: "Come meet the family."

His arm about her waist was not refused.

HEAD'S UP...

One of two different intros to a Tangor "mid-wars" Elmo story. This instant is an aside thanks to a drive-by drabble author. The Tangor possible preferred version has the same characters and a few more, perhaps more ugly. As Tangor's word-smithing is a work in progress we'll have to wait and see which wins out in the end!