

BALLEA WRITERS

NEW MONEY FOR OLD

- BY PAT GOULDING -

Madge watched for a break in the traffic and, when it came, she lost no time in hopping on her bicycle and pedaling furiously through the town, overtaking those same cars that would not stop a few moments before. Now they were once again stuck in a traffic jam while she coasted along. She was late today and she did not like to be so.

Punctuality was one of the things on which she prided herself. However, today was a strange day altogether. Everyone seemed to be out and about and there were queues everywhere. It was all because of the Euro. Such a fuss, she thought, she didn't remember anything like it before and she had been around when the last changeover in money had happened. There had been no scanners and computers in the shops then. People made do with pencil and paper and just got on with it. Today she had to queue in the supermarket at a special desk to change her Irish money before she could go into the shops to get the few bits and pieces she needed.

Madge was well outside the town now and made a right turn into the driveway of The Grange. It was a long pull uphill on the bike to the house, but Madge smiled as she remembered snatches of conversations she had overheard while she had been queuing in the shop.

'Oh! It'll be great now, when we go abroad', one of the blonde ones from that big new housing estate, to her friend. 'No more drachmas or liras or even pesetas or escudos to worry about, not to mention how easy it will be when we take our annual trip over to France to stock up on the old vino for the parties'.

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Now there was a lady for you, and better travelled than the lot of them, thought Madge, as she finally propped her bike against the wall of the house, took the messages from the basket and went in the open door.

Grace had just made a pot of tea and Madge flopped down gratefully on to the nearest chair. 'Sorry, I'm a bit late', she said, 'but between the traffic and queuing for Euros, that village is a madhouse'. 'Never mind dear', said Grace, 'Mr. Elliott has rung to say he'll be delayed himself, so there's no rush. We'll have a nice cup of tea and I've some scones fresh from the oven. We have plenty of time for a chat and you can tell me all your news, so take off your coat and relax'.

Tea over, the two friends moved in complete unison around the kitchen tidying up. Friends they truly had become over the years and it would be hard for a stranger to distinguish employer from employee. Madge had come to work as a 'daily' at the Grange some 20 years ago and herself and Miss Gracie, as she sometimes called her, had seen lots of good and bad times through together.

They moved now into the library where mountains of books stood in piles around the floor. The recent storms had lifted a whole section of the roof of the Grange and water had poured down the wall, damaging quite a few of the books.

Mr. Elliott was a collector of old and rare books and the task now was to sort the ones that were still saleable in the hopes that the money raised would pay for the necessary repairs to the roof. The insurance company had long ago cancelled Grace's policy as the old house was in such a bad state of repair; the underwriters had considered it 'too high a risk'.

Companionably, Madge and Grace worked side by side, sometimes speaking, sometimes not. 'Have you ever been abroad yourself, Madge? I can't seem to remember', Grace suddenly said, thinking about Madge's recounting of the conversation overheard at the shop. 'Well, apart from London, no I haven't', said Madge, 'but I used to go to London a lot in the 60's when my sister, you remember Joan, when she lived there. I can remember my first trip so clearly. It was like a magical place – to be able to go to all the places we used to see at the pictures – Buckingham Palace, Piccadilly Circus, St. Paul's Cathedral, but I loved

going to Oxford Street best of all.

'Mind you, there was very little we could buy in the shops there but it was lovely to look at all the style. It was like stepping into another world, but still I used to get the best laugh down the Sheppard's Bush market on a Sunday morning. What a hoot that was, all them fellows talking forty to the dozen and throwing plates and stuff out into the crowd. God! I did used to enjoy that', Madge sat back on her heels and laughed merrily at her own reminiscences.

'Was there ever any other place you longed to go to', said Grace, 'What about Paris?' 'Well, now of course, that would be something else altogether, wouldn't it' replied Madge. 'That would be a real dream – to visit the city of romance – to glide along the Seine on a barge at sunset and pass under those famous bridge – yes, that would be something, all right. Ah! Well, sure I might as well dream here as in bed. Maybe I'll win the Lotto some day and if I do, I can tell you, then I'll do some travelling.'

'You'll come with me of course. We'll start with Paris, I think. Wouldn't we have a rare ol' time of it over there together, even if we are two old codgers', Madge was laughing heartily again but had to compose herself as they could hear the doorbell ringing insistently.

'That'll be Mr. Elliott', said Grace as she hauled herself up from her knees and went to let him in.

Mr. Elliott set to work in the library, refusing the offer of lunch and accepting only a cup of coffee while he deliberated on his task. At about 4 o'clock he tapped on the kitchen door and asked Grace to join him as he had settled on the books he wanted and it was time to discuss money.

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'Come on Madge', said Grace, this is it – the moment of truth'. Mr. Elliott was a little taken aback by Madge's presence, but Grace insisted that she stay.

'Well, as you are probably aware' Mr. Elliott began, 'the houses of Ireland, particularly houses like this, are packed full of books, some rare, some even valuable but, unfortunately, most are really only relics of a past nobody wants to know about these days and should be consigned to a whacking great bonfire.

However, he paused and then continued 'there are indeed some books here of interest to me and the sum I am prepared to offer you Mrs. Bradfield is this'. He wrote on a piece of paper and handed it to Grace for inspiration. Grace's face fell. 'Is that all', Grace groaned. 'That will only just about cover the cost of the storm damage to the house, I was rather hoping,' Mr. Elliott cut across her 'I don't think you'll find anyone else who will be interested and, of course, I have the cash here with me now'.

'Would that be Euros or pounds?' Madge blurted out. She didn't know why she said that. She hadn't even seen what he had written on the piece of paper. It was nerves she supposed. Mr. Elliott gave her a withering glance and turned to Grace. 'Well, Mrs. Bradfield, what's it to be?' 'I'll take it', said Grace, and Mr. Elliott counted out the notes. Madge was glad to see that they were at least, Irish; they would know where they were with them.

'I have stacked all the books I require on that side table

there', said Mr. Elliott, 'and I shall send someone around tomorrow to collect them. I'll see myself out then', he said as neither of the two women showed any signs of responding.

They just stood there; looking at the piles of books that still remained on the floor. 'What will we do with them all, said Grace eventually. 'Well, don't worry about that lot over there, said Madge pointing to the pile of books that had been water damaged. 'I'll get John to come up in the morning and he can see to them, but it would be a crying shame to burn all them beautiful books', while she had been speaking, Madge had been picking up books at random and lovingly running her hands over them. 'Look at that binding and gold lettering, not to mention the lovely leather on them. 'No, Miss Gracie, we'll sort them all out in time and when the wall has been re-plastered, we'll get John to put them up the shelves and there they'll be, a thing of beauty, if nothing else'.

Grace seemed beyond caring. Madge picked up one book and leaved through it. 'Will you look at this, Grace' she said. 'Care and Management of the Home for the Modern Woman' published in 1915. Look at the ads for Tonic Wine and those Banana shaped babies' bottles for 1 shilling and sixpence. There's even a section on 'The Law of Master and Servant' and there's Ready Reckoner for Servants' Wages'.

Madge would have gone on and on but Grace seemed tired suddenly and told Madge that she was welcome to take and keep any of the books that interested her. It was only then that Madge realised what a strain and a disappointment the day had been for Grace and quickly said her goodbyes and set off for home, looking forward to reading at her leisure the book that had so taken her fancy. Later that evening, the articles and advertisement in the book enthralled Madge and she noticed there was an envelope stuck on to the back inside cover, which was marked 'My Favourite Menus'. There did not appear to be any menu cards in it but there was something solid down at the bottom of the envelope. Madge poked two fingers into the envelope and drew out a muslin wrapped package.

Undoing the folds of muslin, six coins fell out and Madge instantly recognised them for what they were. They were gold sovereigns but one appeared to be smaller than the others, rather like the side of that new one-cent coin. She was excited at her find and she knew the very man who would tell her all about them and their value, for valuable she was sure they were. Madge went off to bed, almost too excited to sleep.

In the morning, Madge made a few telephone calls and then set off to visit Mr. Quinlan. He must be a very old man by now, Madge thought, and fretted that maybe he had retired from the business. However, she knew that he would advise her wisely. She trusted old Mr. Quinlan implicitly, for hadn't he been her father's greatest friend and an expert on antiques and coins.

Mr. Quinlan greeted Madge with great affection and surprise and was greatly excited by her find. He felt sure he could locate a party he knew would be interested in buying the coins and would give her a very good price for them.

The small coin, he explained to Madge, was, in fact, a half sovereign and it had been minted specially for Queen Victoria's Jubilee. It was actually more valuable than all the others.

Madge went off to have a cup of tea and look around the shops for an hour and when she returned. Mr. Quinlan had extremely good news.

The sum he mentioned had Madge clapping her hands with delight and she couldn't wait to get back to the Grange to tell her friend of her good fortune.

On the way she hummed a little tune to herself. She was completely unaware that the tune she hummed was 'Under the Bridges of Paris'.

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