

FABRIC
by
Robert Fieldsteel

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

MAX	American. Jewish. In textiles. Quite successful at it. Speaks in upper-class, standard American speech, occasionally (and effortlessly) slipping into New York and Yiddish idiom.
RACHEL	American. Jewish. Max's wife. Ditto, re: speech patterns; perhaps more "British" when among Britishers.
WINIFRED	British. Upper-class.
ROLAND	British. Upper-class.
WOMAN	Well-dressed, at the Ascot races.
TRACK ANNOUNCER	British. Offstage (could conceivably be recorded).

SETTING

1910. An abstract set representing Max and Rachel's hotel room and the Ascot Racetrack. The hotel room may have some furniture to allow for sitting and/or laying out fabric samples.

NOTES

The script implies the use of elegant period costumes. If this is not within the budget of production, a stylized representation could be utilized, e.g. unit/black costuming with one or two elements, such as hats and gloves, etc. The women, however, must have dress sashes. They don't have to have the dresses, but do need the sashes.

MUSIC: Strings and such, lively and rousing.

MAX, dressed in a grey morning suit, examines a swatch of printed fabric. RACHEL, dressed in elegant daywear, circa 1910, is putting final touches on her makeup, etc. They speak in upper class, standard American speech, laced with Yiddishisms.

MAX

It's the stems, the stems and the vines, the way they flow in and out of each other --

RACHEL

--Mm, quite sensual--

MAX

--but the rest doesn't work, the big flowers--

RACHEL

--those *alt modish* flowers --

MAX

--Like Grandma's *schmata*. Smaller flowers: they cut better too--

RACHEL

-- and no wretched half-flower on the seam --

MAX

--Exactly. We do that, and we could have a winner, my love. Big, big seller.

(looking at her)

You look very lovely.

RACHEL

I'm not supposed to look lovely. I'm supposed to look inconspicuous.

MAX

This is the Ascot Stakes we're dealing with here -- lovely, beautiful, and stylish *is* inconspicuous. And you look very inconspicuous.

RACHEL

(lets out a romantic sigh)

Well -- Tally-Ho, Maxey!

MAX

Tally-Ho, Racheluh!

They begin to "exit" arm in arm. LIGHTS SHIFT.
MUSIC:again, lively.

MAX and RACHEL, "enter," strolling arm and arm. They nod to (unseen) passersby. Downstage, a WOMAN in a pretty dress, pretty hat, strolls, occasionally peering through opera glasses. We hear the voice of a TRACK ANNOUNCER, upper-crust British and quite low-key.

TRACK ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

One minute to post time for the Ascot Hardwicke stakes. One minute to post time. All betting is closed for the Ascot Hardwicke Stakes.

(beat)

Ladies and Gentlemen: His Majesty, King George the Fifth.

All stand still as MUSIC: GOD SAVE THE KING plays. MAX and RACHEL take notice of the WOMAN, then glance at each other, nod assent. MAX AND RACHEL inch toward the WOMAN. END MUSIC.

TRACK ANNOUNCER (O.S.,
CON'T)

All horses have taken position at the gate. It is now post time. Post time for the Ascot Hardwicke stakes.

MAX is now standing just slightly behind the WOMAN. RACHEL is at his side. RACHEL and the WOMAN peer through opera glasses, RACHEL occasionally glancing sidelong at MAX.

TRACK ANNOUNCER (O.S.,
CON'T)

Aaand ... they're off.

SOUND of HORSE'S GALLOPING. Throughout the scene, the sound slowly gets louder. YOUNG WOMAN and RACHEL, peering through their opera glasses, follow the action on the course.

MAX deftly reaches over to the sash on the WOMAN's dress and ever-so-delicately lifts it, holding it outward. With his other hand, he slowly retrieves a rather large pair of scissors from his pocket. As the SOUND OF THE HORSE HOOVES reaches a THUNDEROUS CLIMAX, the horses crossing in front of our threesome, MAX takes the scissors and quickly cuts a swatch of fabric from the WOMAN'S dress.

SUDDEN LIGHT SHIFT. Simultaneously, an abrupt CUT-OFF of the HORSE-HOOVES SOUND.

MAX and RACHEL, exultant, back at their hotel. Max pulls swatch after swatch from his pockets.

MAX

So innovative!!

RACHEL

So very innovative!! Oh, darling, there's so much here you can just *run* with, make your own --

MAX

Yes, but is America ready for this kind of--

RACHEL

So a design lays an egg, if it's *new*, it still makes talk.

MAX

Talk is good. Talk is very good. Oh, I can't wait for the Gold Cup Race tomorrow!

RACHEL

I think this is our best Ascot season yet, Maxey. You know, I don't want to jinx this, but you'd think we'd have heard a fuss made by now. You'd think one of those *nebbukah* women would have made a fuss, "Oh, my dress is ruined," and then another, and then--

MAX

They're *British*. They don't know from fussing . Besides, once the dress has been unveiled at Ascot, they don't wear it again. I'm just rescuing fragments of beauty before they're relegated to some closet.

RACHEL

You'd think, still, we'd have heard something, "The Ascot Snipper" or some such thing.

MAX

Ha! "Extra, extra, The Ascot Snipper Strikes Again!"

RACHEL

"Max the Snipper."

MAX

HA-HA!! "Max the Snipper." Oh, darling!

LIGHT SHIFT. MUSIC. Back at Ascot. An upper-class, middle-aged couple, ROLAND and WINIFRED, stand downstage. MAX and RACHEL enter as before.

ROLAND

Well if Bayardo is such a poor choice, then why are so many people betting on him?

WINIFRED

I didn't say he was a poor choice, Rollie, I said I thought you could spread it around a little. Go for a long shot.

ROLAND

I'll wager I ask four people here what horse to bet on, and three will say, "Bayardo". A sure thing's a sure -- let me show you --

(sees MAX and RACHEL nearby,
calls out to MAX:)

You sir -- yes, you --

WINIFRED

Rollie, don't, please--

ROLAND

You sir -- tell me, what's your pick for the Gold Cup?

MAX and RACHEL are a bit reluctant to engage with this couple, but are polite nonetheless.

MAX

Prince Palatine. [pronounced pal' e tin]

WINIFRED

Ha! And what do you think of Bayardo?

MAX

Probably the wiser choice.

ROLAND

There you have it! Ha-ha! Got you, Winnie!

WINIFRED

I don't believe I've seen you here at Ascot. Is this your first time?

MAX

We were here several years ago, we're so happy to be back.

ROLAND

Gone downhill, don't you think? Selling *vouchers* to enter the Royal Enclosure. Anything for a price. Probably paid for in shekels, you ask me.

MAX

Mm. But there's nothing that could spoil Ascot. Good day.

He starts to exit, but is stopped by:

WINIFRED

Tell me, by whom were you invited? Perhaps we have people in common. I'm Winifred Coombs, this is my husband Roland.

MAX

George Madison. My wife -- Abigail. Guests of Wilfred and Emily Chichester.

ROLAND

Ah, Freddy Chichester! We've known Freddy and Emily--

WINIFRED

Yes, *everyone* knows Freddy and Emily, you can't pick up the society page without finding more about them than you'd ever want to know.

MAX

And we know that they were expecting to meet us by the grandstand five minutes ago. So sorry to run.

WINIFRED

Yes, well. I wish we could have chatted more. Perhaps we could have found *other* people in common.

ROLAND

Getting harder and harder these days. Like a bloody invasion, it is.

RACHEL

(somewhat impulsively)

Tell me, do you feel that way about Americans?

WINIFRED

Oh, are you Americans?

RACHEL

My husband and I are both--

WINIFRED

I would have guessed something more Mediterranean.

RACHEL

I am an American, but I was born in Russia. A black Russian, some would call it. Hence, your confusion.

MAX

Well, I hope that clears everything up --

RACHEL

My father was Prince Gregor of Muscovy.

Beat.

ROLAND

Never heard of *that* one.

RACHEL

I wouldn't expect it. Perhaps you've heard of his work. He designed the Nevghy Novegerad Dam.

WINIFRED

Ah, yes. The Nevghy Novgerad Dam.

ROLAND

Yes, Nevghy Novgerad, most impressive. So he must have been responsible for designing the, what do you call them, the big, uh, you know, the big pistons, quite revolutionary.

MAX

(joining in the fun)

Yes. So revolutionary, in fact, that they're untranslatable. The Russian word is *Farblungets*.

ROLAND

Yes, that's it! "Farblungets". A bit onomatopoeic, isn't it -
- "farblunget, farblunget, farblunget . . ."

RACHEL

My, what an astute observation!

WINIFRED

Doesn't sound very Russian to me. Low-German, perhaps.

MAX

You know, pardon me for changing the subject a moment, but I have to say, of all the dresses here at Ascot today, I find your dress the most striking.

WINIFRED

Well, you--

MAX

My wife's, of course, is the most lovely --

(They all laugh politely)

--but yours is so very striking. Tell me, how did you ... put it all together?

WINIFRED

The materials, I'm afraid, were ... lifted.

MAX

Lifted?

ROLAND

(warning)

Winifred ...

WINIFRED

Yes. Lifted. I hire a little Jewish man with a keen eye for quality and a sharp nose for value. A very big, sharp nose, if you will. Anyway, this little man, let's call him, what shall we call him -- "Hymie Kikenbaum" --

ROLAND

(laughing)

"Hymie Kikenbaum"--

WINIFRED

Yes, Hymie Kikenbaum has several
(Yiddish accent:)

"business connections" at the wharfs. When the ships arrive, they let Hymie sniff out the goods he likes , he pays off the "connections," and the goods are reported lost in transit.

ROLAND

You won't breathe a word--

RACHEL

We wouldn't dream --

WINIFRED

So that's how I got the material. Mind you, I don't make a habit of consorting with Hymie's kind, but they do have a skill for the nefarious. In fact, you could say Hymie fed from the trough twice on this one, as his wife's a nimble seamstress. Poor wretch doesn't know how good she is -- the result is, as you say, quite striking. Although when he delivered it, I had to air it out for the longest time. To get rid of the stench. You must know that stench. Rather like stale sweat and wet cabbage. And *my* nose is so very sensitive.

Brief pause. Then:

TRACK ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

One minute to post time for the Ascot Gold Cup. All betting is closed for the Ascot Gold Cup.

RACHEL

Well ... good luck with Bayardo.
(exiting)

Ta.

MAX

Oh, no reason to go, darling. Let's watch from here.

RACHEL

(suspecting, "uh-oh":)

But we must go, darling. The...Chichesters are expecting us.

MAX

Oh, it's too late to join up with the Chichesters. I like the view from right here.

(To Winifred & Roland)

You don't mind, do you?

ROLAND

No, of course not. You can congratulate me when Bayardo wins.

MAX

Ha! Yes, we'll all watch the race together.

RACHEL joins them, reluctantly. MAX is standing in between WINIFRED and RACHEL.

TRACK ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

All horses have taken their position at the gate. It is now post time for the Ascot Gold Cup. Aaaand ... they're off.

SOUND OF HORSES GALLOPING. All look through opera glasses, RACHEL checking on MAX. Sure enough, MAX pulls out his scissors. RACHEL tries to signal "no." MAX ignores her and ever-so-delicately lifts the sash of WINIFRED'S dress. THE SOUND of the HORSE HOOVES is THUNDEROUS.

Just as MAX opens the scissors and is about to cut WINIFRED'S sash, SHE turns away from her opera glasses and looks at him, catching him mid-act. MAX and WINIFRED'S eyes lock. RACHEL looks sidelong at both of them. ROLAND just watches the race. The moment is suspended for as long as it will allow. Then, suddenly, swiftly, MAX cuts the end off of WINIFRED'S sash.

THE HORSE HOOVES sound begins to subside. WINIFRED smiles wryly, leans over to MAX, and whispers into his ear. Then she calmly lifts her glasses again and watches the rest of the race.

TRACK ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

And a victory for Bayardo! Bayardo first, Sir Martin to place, Swynford to show.

ROLAND

Ha! What did I tell you? Good old Bayardo! I know how to pick 'em!

MAX
 (exiting, chivalrously:)
 Congratulations, old boy.

RACHEL
 Good afternoon.

WINIFRED
 Good afternoon.

MAX and RACHEL "exit."

ROLAND
 That was a rather hasty retreat. I noticed you whispering to him, what was that all about?

WINIFRED
 I was informing our dear friend that his fly was unbuttoned.

ROLAND
 Ha! That's rich! Sorry old fellow caught at Ascot with his fly open!

LIGHTS SHIFT TO MAX AND RACHEL, walking.

RACHEL
 So ... what was she whispering to you.

MAX
 Oh, nothing surprising. "Once a ragpicker ..."

RACHEL
 Lovely.

They "arrive" at the hotel (time gets condensed here, is played continuous), he sits, wearily.

MAX
 I've heard worse. It was that smug little smile of hers that got me.

He takes the piece of cut fabric out of his pocket, looks at it.

RACHEL
 I do wish we could avoid that kind of ... ugliness.

MAX
 My dear, there are two things that will never go out of fashion: floral prints and anti-semitism.

(Re: Winifred's swatch)

I can't do anything with this dreck.

(He tosses it away.)

Picks up the swatch from scene
one:)

But this one. Love the vines, very sensual as you say. But the flowers, even if you made them smaller ... it needs something.

RACHEL

How about pomegranates?

MAX

Pomegranates?

RACHEL

Mm. Little pomegranates. Even open ones. With the seeds.

MAX

(holds the swatch out,
envisioning it)

That's a wild idea, Racheluh.

RACHEL

My mother always gave us pomegranates on Rosh Hashanah.

MAX

Mine too. Always.

RACHEL

She said they stood for good deeds. And fertility. All the seeds.

MAX

Huh. Mine said the little seeds in their compartments stood for all the good little boys in *shul* studying torah and minding their own business.

Beat.

RACHEL

Do you think that woman will expose us?

MAX

No. If she didn't do it then, she won't bother.

RACHEL

Still ... one wonders if we could come back here again.

MAX

Ascot's done very well for us. But perhaps it's time to move on.

(Beat. Looks at the swatch.)

The pomegranate. The pomegranate could be a winner.

RACHEL

I think it will be, my love. I'm sure it will.

LIGHTS FADE.

END OF PLAY