

DECEPTION

Ronald McKenzie, after his retirement as an insurance officer in Birmingham, took up painting, simply as a hobby, but soon proved to be a genius in this art form. His works shot to instant fame, winning him great acclaim throughout Europe. It was in his genes, he claimed and also to everyone's agreement, but only that it took an eternity to manifest itself in his creations. And now he was seeking apprenticeship under a great painter of his times, at Amsterdam - something he felt would be a big stride in his already flourishing career.

After a six-hour long flight to the Dutch capital, he felt very jaded and so dropped at a downtown cafe for refreshments. Having placed his orders, he sat at his table, going through *The Evening Times*. Meanwhile, a tall gentleman, with a huge mane on his shoulders, took the marble table next to him. The waiter called him 'Mr. Newlans'. Ronald quivered. He glanced sideways, but his neighbour did not seem to notice him. In the meantime, two young men barged into the cafe and took their seats opposite Ronald's conspicuous neighbour. Immediately, they started clamouring for something to Mr. Newlans, who with his head buried between his arms, appeared indifferent to their demands. Glaring momentarily at each other, the two left as briskly as they had entered. The business being supposedly over, the unfazed listener prepared to relinquish his wooden stool.

Ronald seized his moment.

"Excuse me, monsieur."

"Yes?"

"Pardon me if I'm wrong, but are you the illustrious Harry Newlans who visited one of De Movre's exhibitions?" Harry nodded in assent.

Ronald shook him warmly by the hand; the latter, gratified, returned the gesture with a friendly nod. "And I am Ronald McKenzie - I was also there that day I'm a great admirer of your renditions, sir." The two chatted for a while. Ronald apprised Harry

of his achievements, his proposed future ventures, but the latter remained all too modest.

Mr. Newlans was visibly unsettled. He was busy shuffling his legs, observed his surroundings with rising impatience and at last clumsily exclaimed. "I gotta go I got stuff. Ah ... would you mind coming along? - It's a housewarming, obviously a rented one for my upcoming concerts, with some of my acquaintances."

"It would be more than a privilege, sir!"

The two wended their way through the broad avenues of suburban Amsterdam, flanked by the churlish townfolk and numerous hutments. But none of the passers-by seemed to recognise the renowned musician. "Maybe he's not so popular in these parts. Not necessary, is it?" Ronald mused to himself.

"Sir, who were those young men at the cafe?"

"Oh, they just wanted tickets for my concert."

"Can't imagine such impolite behaviour towards a man of your stature! You've been very tolerant, I must say." Harry smiled wanly.

Ambling down a sordid, grimy street, they finally came upon a red brick house. An expansive marquee overhung the deep front porch; winding rickety steps, bounded by modest banisters, led up to Mr. Newlans' room. Harry entered first, while Ronald stood at the door, admiring the immense apartment. Cherubs and demigods festooned the ceiling; cobwebs dropped over the chandelier; on the mantelpiece, lay the fascinating model of a pirate ship, on the bulwark of which was engraved, 'The Great Wanderer, 1820.' Nothing else in the room was remarkable except an old print of the town, dated the same year. "Oh, I just remembered, I gotta go to the market," exclaimed Harry, suddenly caught in a fit of urgency. "I'll be returning in just 10 minutes. If any guests arrive during my absence, please play the host for me, will ya?" 10 minutes went in no time, an hour passed by, but Harry didn't turn up.

All along, Ronald stood at the window. The sun was sinking at the horizon, its mellow rays flickered in through the thick foliage of cypress and oak trees and formed a kaleidoscope of intricate textures and patterns on the mosaic floor. A vibrant multitude of tulips and dandelions adorned the fringes of a placid lake, church bells chimed in the distance. A wrinkled,

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old man, in black velvet and a sombre grey hat, walked to and fro on the lawn below, his face disappearing into darkness, but Ronald could see him flaunting the devil's grin. And then the Apocalypse. At least that's what it seemed like.

There was a loud, dreadful noise; a steady trample of feet on the stairs below, the building was shaking to its foundations.

The door flew open and long files of gaily clad, exuberant men and women, mostly in twos, entered the apartment in a frenzy, totally ignoring the painter. One of them finally caught sight of him and shrieked, "Look people, what do we have here! Harry has left a waiter to serve us."

They jeered and whirled round him, mocking his presence. Ronald's face turned crimson.

"But I'm a special guest of Mr. Newlans", he blurted out rather exasperatedly. There was a moment's uneasy silence and then a wild outburst of laughter.

One of them asked, "How did you come to be here, my friend?" Ronald explained, with pride, his maiden foray into the world of glamour, his recent projects, his chance meeting with Mr. Newlans and how he had spent the rest of the evening. They all crowded around him to listen to his tales of glory and greeted him with words of applause. Ronald basked

in all the attention he received; he drank, he laughed, he talked and sang too. From that moment on, he forgot everything.

When he woke up next day, it was broad daylight. He squinted with puffy eyes, through the dazzling sunrays, to find himself lying in a strange bed in what appeared to be a dilapidated outhouse. Everything in that room appeared surreal and nightmarish to him. He sat up and immediately obscure fragments of the previous night came up before his eyes, but he failed to discern why they would have done this to him. Harry's untimely departure perplexed him. What could have been his real motive? The more he thought about it, the more he found himself at sea. He searched his pockets, but found nothing - they had taken everything: passport, money, credit cards and left him helpless in a foreign land.

He managed to contact some of his friends and arrange for money, another passport and it was two more days before he could leave Amsterdam. From that day on, when anybody talked about music in the operas, exhibitions, salons and several other royal gatherings he would attend, Ronald would declare with an air of authority that music was a very inferior art.

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