

The Lamp Man

David Wheldon

He wore a faded blue boiler-suit, the colour of his eyes. It was patched with newer, darker denim at the elbows and knees; the patches were sewn on with small, neat stitches. It had been home-washed, this boiler-suit, for it had been carefully — even painstakingly — ironed and folded.

He looked in at the embrasure in the brick wall of the passage, his manner teacherly. I, a boy, stood beside him. ‘See the interior of the powder magazine?’ He paused. ‘I can’t myself see the magazine that clearly — from where I am standing — because of the reflection of the lamps. But I am paid to light and maintain the lamps. I work in the Fort, and the Fort is the place of my livelihood. I am the lamp man and I understand the Fort from a lamp man’s point of view. I started work at fifteen.’ He put his head on one side. ‘I shall retire very soon. I shall be seventy.’ His voice was reflective. ‘Fifty-five years.’

He paused. Then he spoke once more. ‘We walk along the lamp man’s corridor. Understand the lamp man’s corridor. Vaulted brick. Narrow. Deep underground: far beneath the Parade. The lamp man alone has need to use it. I spent a week learning from the previous lamp man: he approved me: then I was on my own. And on my own I have been ever since, until you arrived. No-one but me ordinarily walks this passage. I begin my work at seven in the morning, and set the lighted lamps in the floors of the embrasures, removing the lamps which have burned throughout the night. Then I return, and fill the replacement lamps with paraffin, replace the cotton wicks as necessary, polishing the lamp-chimneys and the reflectors. I work sequentially, replacing every alternate lamp first. It’s quite pleasing, the orderliness of it. In the routine I have my mind to myself, in a place of almost perfect silence. Then, about noon, I change the lamps. All is studied. The magazine is thus illumined, thoroughly and evenly, throughout the day and night: all is in a state of readiness. I have three hours sleep. And then I begin once more. I eat my frugal meal alone. I carry the light, the everlasting light from which I light the lamps. So, you see, flame is transmitted to flame, and so the magazine is illumined. There are forty lamps in operation at any one time.’

He smiled. His smile was a little secretive. ‘See the figures in the magazine? Ghost-like, in white apparel, cotton, probably, silent, forbidden to carry any object of iron or steel, lest they make a spark? Glim-felt-slippered, hooded? Who are they? They move like ghosts. They move deliberately but cautiously amongst the barrels of black-powder, the proofed sacks of gun-cotton and the carousels of fuzes. And yet I illumine them: and give them light, even light, almost shadowless.

‘My world is separate from theirs.’

He paused. He moved from his subject. ‘My mother danced the can-can. In Paris. It was her metier. She told me so. Who my father was I never knew: but I loved my mother. I am half-French. That’s an irony, working as a lamp man in an English fort.’ He returned to his subject. ‘Anyway, I am the lamp man. Huge vaulted brick structures, meaning nothing to me. I tender my pass on crossing the moat. I light the lamps.’

He paused. ‘My smiling mother, lifting her skirts, kicking her long legs, long ago. I have photographs. Long before I was born. I have a little film I cannot now watch. Sylvia, her best friend and apparently a witness at her wedding, next to her. Do you understand?’

‘Now I’m quite old. I walk along the narrow lamp-passage, brick-built, vaulted. Its sole purpose to allow the illuminator passage. The deep embrasures in the wall have several layers

of plate-glass sealed at the far end of each. I set my lamps within these embrasures. There is thus no chance of fire entering the magazine. My lamps are caged for double security. The magazine is thus effectively lit externally. There is no communication between the lamp man and the explosives artificers. I guess I am invisible to them.

‘And the white-clad figures within the magazine rely upon my secluded light, myself unseen. I am the solitary lamp man. I am a civilian. I obtain my wage from the Adjutant’s secretary’s office. It is not much, but it is sufficient. I am apportioned a new boiler-suit every six months. At the Fort’s expense. A woman in the laundry’s linen-room insists on pressing it after every wash with a flat-iron. She repairs my boiler suits as needed. I’ve never met her. It’s better so. Her work is very neat. Who is she, in her devotion to her duties? It’s all fair, as set down in my contract. Everyone should be fastidious in their devotion to their duty.

‘And as for the Fort: it is obsolete. It was obsolete the day that it was armed.

‘You, my child: do you understand?’

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