



Absolute Beginners

COLIN MACINNES

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For Alfred Maron

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IN JUNE

It was with the advent of the Laurie London era that I realised the whole teenage epic was tottering to doom.

‘Fourteen years old, that absolute beginner,’ I said to the Wizard as we paused casually in the gramophone section to hear Little Laurie in that golden disc performance of his.

‘From now on,’ said Wizard, ‘he’s certainly Got the Whole World in His Hands.’

We listened to the wonder boy’s nostrils spinning on.

‘They buy us younger every year,’ I cried. ‘Why, Little Mr L.’s voice hasn’t even dropped yet, so who will those taxpayers try to kidnap next?’

‘Sucklings,’ said Wizard.

We climbed the white stair to the glass garden under the top roof of the department store, and came out on the glorious panorama, our favourite rendezvous.

I must explain the Wiz and I never come to this store to buy anything except, as today, a smoke-salmon sandwich and ice coffee. But in the first place, we have the opportunity to see the latest furnishings and fabrics, just like some married couple, and also to have the splendid outlook over London, the most miraculous I know in the whole city, and quite unknown to other nuisance-values of our age, in fact to everyone, it seems, except these elderly female Chelsea peasants who come up there for their elevenses.

Looking north you don't see much, it's true, and westward the view's entirely blocked up by the building you're inside. But twisting slowly on your bar stool from the east to south, like Cinerama, you can see clean new concrete cloud-kissers, rising up like felixes from the Olde Englishe squares, and then those gorgeous parks, with trees like classical French salads, and then again the port life down along the Thames, that glorious river, reminding you we're on an estuary, a salt inlet really, with crazy seagulls circling up from it and almost bashing their beaks against the circular plate glass, and then, before you know it, you're back again round a full circle in front of your iced coffee cup.

'Laurie L.,' I said, 's a sign of decadence. This teenage thing is getting out of hand.'

The Wiz looked wise, like the middle feller of the three old monkeys.

'It's not the taxpayers,' he said, 'who are responsible. It's the kids themselves, for buying the EPs these elderly sordids bribe the teenage nightingales to wax.'

‘No doubt,’ I said, for I know better than ever to argue with the Wizard, or with anyone else who gets his kicks from an idea.

Mr Wiz continued, masticating his salmon sandwich for anyone to see, ‘It’s been a two-way twist, this teenage party. Exploitation of the kiddos by the conscripts, and exploitation of themselves by the crafty little absolute beginners. The net result? “Teenager” ’s become a dirty word or, at any rate, a square one.’

I smiled at Mr W. ‘Well, take it easy, son,’ I said, ‘because a sixteen year old sperm like you has got a lot of teenage living still to do. As for me, eighteen summers, rising nineteen, I’ll very soon be out there among the oldies.’

The Wizard eyed me with his Somerset Maugham appearance. ‘Me, boy,’ he said, ‘I tell you. As things are, I won’t regret it when the teenage label’s torn off the arse pockets of my drip-dry sky-blue jeans.’

What the Wiz said was at any rate partially true. This teenage ball had had a real splendour in the days when the kids discovered that, for the first time since centuries of kingdom-come, they’d money, which hitherto had always been denied to us at the best time in life to use it, namely, when you’re young and strong, and also before the newspapers and telly got hold of this teenage fable and prostituted it as conscripts seem to do to everything they touch. Yes, I tell you, it had a real savage splendour in the days when we found that no one couldn’t sit on our faces any more because we’d loot to spend at last, and our world was to be our world, the one we wanted

and not standing on the doorstep of somebody else's waiting for honey, perhaps.

I got off my stool and went and stood by the glass of that tottering old department store, pressed up so close it was like I was out there in the air, suspended over space above the city, and I swore by Elvis and all the saints that this last teenage year of mine was going to be a real rave. Yes, man, come whatever, this last year of the teenage dream I was out for kicks and fantasy.

But my peace was shattered by the noise I heard of Wizard in an argument with the conscript behind the counter bar.

I should explain the Wiz has for all oldies just the same kind of hatred psychos have for Jews or foreigners or coloureds, that is, he hates everyone who's not a teenager, except for short-pant sperms and chicklets, whom I suppose he regards as teenagers in bud. The Wiz just doesn't like the population outside the teenage bracket, and takes every chance he gets to make the oldies conscious of their hair-root dyes, and sing out aloud the anthem of the teenage triumph.

Wiz has the art of clawing the poor taxpayers on the raw. Even from where I stood I saw the barman's face was lurid as a point steak, and as I approached I heard that sharp, flat, dry little voice the Wizard has was needling him with, 'Oh, I suppose you're underpaid, boy, that's what's the matter with you. Don't like your work up here with these old hens.'

'You'd best settle up and 'op it,' said the conscript.

The Wizard turned to me. "'Op it," he says – just

listen! This serf speaks authentic old-tyme *My Fair Lady* dialect.'

The Wizard's tactic always was to tempt the enemy to strike him, which, because he's small and seems so slender and so juvenile, arouses sympathy of other oldsters, the born aunts among them especially, who take his side and split the anti-teenage camp wide open. He often succeeds, because I can tell you he's completely fearless, a thoroughly vicious, dirty little pugilist, and only fails when sometimes they laugh at him, which makes him beside himself with rage.

The present argument, as I expected, was about the bill, which Wizard, when he's in the mood, will query even if it's for an item like a cup of tea. And often, even when he's loaded, he'll make out he's completely skint and say to them well, there you are, I've got no money, what you going to do about it? And this with the left breast pocket of his Continental casual jacket stuffed with notes and even visible, but his face so fierce and come-and-kill-me that it frightens them, and even me. It usually seems to work, because they say get to hell out, which he does in his own time, and at his own speed, as if it was an eight-course meal he'd had and paid for, not just bounced a bill.

I paid for him, and Wiz didn't mind my paying, only laughed that little ha-ha laugh of his as we walked down the white and silver metal stair. 'Boy,' he said, 'you're a born adult number. With your conventional outlook, you just can't wait to be a family man.'

I was vexed at him, but answered, 'Don't be like that,

Wizard. We all know you're loaded, so why do you play that kindergarten game?'

Which is a fact, I mean his being loaded, because the Wiz, in spite of his tender years, is, for his age, the number one hustler of the capital, his genius being in introducing A to B, or vice versa, that is to say, if someone has an article to sell, and someone else desires it, Wiz has a marvellous instinct for meeting them both and bringing them together. But, you might answer, that's what shops are for, which is exact. But not for exchanging the sort of article the Wizard's customers are interested in which, as you've guessed, are not so legal, and when I say 'article', I mean it may be the kind of services which might make you call the Wiz a pimp, or a procurer if you wanted to, not that it would worry him particularly.

I've wondered how the Wizard gets away with it, because, after all, he deals with male and female hustlers who must be wiser than he is, and certainly, at any rate, are stronger. But he handles them all right – in fact in a way that makes you proud to be a kid. And how he does it is, I think, that he's found out at a very early age what most kids never know, and what it took me years myself to discover – in fact it didn't dawn on me until this year, when the knowledge of it's come too late to use – namely, that youth has power, a kind of divine power straight from mother nature. All the old taxpayers know of this because, of course, for one thing, the poor old sordids recollect their own glorious teenage days, but yet they're so jealous of us, they hide this fact, and whisper it among themselves. As for the boys and girls,

the dear young absolute beginners, I sometimes feel that if they only *knew* this fact, this very simple fact, namely how powerful they really are, then they could rise up overnight and enslave the old taxpayers, the whole damn lot of them – toupets and falsies and rejuvenators and all – even though they number millions and sit in the seats of strength. And I guess it was the fact that only little Wizard realised this, and not all the other two million teenagers they say exist throughout our country, that makes him so sour, like a general with lazy troops he can't lead into battle.

'He's got the whole wide world in his hands!

He's got this crumby village drapers, in his hands!

He's got . . .'

This was the Wizard, singing his improvisation on the Laurie London number. And as the stairway cage was probably built of breeze blocks, there was a loudhailer echo up and down the flights which astonished the lady peasants who were using it to carry home their purchases.

'Easy now,' I said, laying my hand upon the Wizard's arm.

He wrenched it away, and glared at me as if I was what I certainly *was* just at that moment, his deadliest enemy.

'Don't *touch* me!' he said, if you can call it 'said', because 'screeched' would be more like it.

'All right, big boy,' I told him, mentally washing my hands of the whole damn matter.

We came out of the glass doors into an absolutely

fabulous June day, such as only that old whore London can throw up, though very occasionally. The Wizard stood looking up at me as if debating whether to insult me, or to call the cold war off.

‘Dig this, Wiz,’ I said to him. ‘I’m not by nature given to interference, it’s just that I think the way you’re going on you’ll kill yourself, which I’d regret.’

This seemed to please him, and he smiled. And when the little Wizard drops his guard it really is miraculous, because a really charming boy looks out at you from behind that razor-edge face of his, if only for an instant. But he didn’t say anything to me.

‘I got to go and see Suzette,’ I told him. ‘I hear she has a client for me.’

‘You should like that,’ said Wizard, ‘after you’ve spent so much paying bills for *me*.’

‘You’re a horrid little creature, Wiz,’ I told him. ‘It’s a wonder to me they don’t use you for some experiment.’

‘See you,’ said Wizard. ‘Please give my hate to little Suze.’

He’d hailed a cab, because Wizard only travels about in taxis, and will walk for miles rather than use the public transportation system, though I sometimes have known him take a late-night bus. He had a long argument with the driver before he got in – it seems Wizard was trying to persuade the citizen to leave one door open, so that the summer breezes could ruffle the Wizard’s true-blond Marlon Brando hairdo on his journey.

But I couldn’t wait to see if he succeeded, because with Suzette you have to be dead on time for this reason,