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WAR STORY

by Philippa Peters

I. TALENT SHOW

Colonel John Clayton Turner wanted to meet and discuss his son's problems with him, but A company's talent show was pretty close to a Command Performance for its Commanding Officer. He left word with the Duty Officers, however, for his son, Richard. The boy could find him when he arrived from the station.

"Ten-hut!" Warrant Officer Kelly's bellow brought every man in the Quonset to his feet with a snap.

The colonel walked quickly to his place beside Captain Lazarowich, the company commander. Even before the two could exchange their usual pleasantries, a scratchy record had launched into the "Star-Spangled Banner". The lights dimmed immediately on completion of the National Anthem. There was a scuffling, then, as everyone tried to find their seats quickly before the show began.

As a 'talent' show, it didn't have much to commend it, but the performers were enthusiastic, and the audience was willing to forgive a lot. It made for a diverting evening. A rather good jazz quintet was doing a fine rendition of an Armstrong/Hines number when Mac Lazarowich touched J.C.'s arm and pointed to the exit. The Colonel's younger son, Richard, waved to his father across the shack. He didn't display any urgency; and so J.C. sat back and enjoyed the jazz group.

The next sketch was a short play, a skit, about beautiful spies and bumbling German soldiers. Since A company was all-male, the 'beautiful' Mata Haris left much to the imagination. There was one, whoever, who took 'her' part very well. To begin with, she spoke excellent French in a throaty drawl that concealed her true sex very well.

'She' looked good, too. You'd have been fooled if you hadn't known where you were, thought the Colonel, smiling as she vamped a very uncomfortable Sergeant Barris. The actor, hmm, the actress (!), wore a dark, brown wig, the thick fringe cut straight across 'her' forehead, matching the straight cut of the thick hair that bounced so naturally on her shoulders. 'She' wore the evening gown with confidence and style. 'Her' figure wasn't impossible and ludicrously padded like the other 'girls' in the sketch. The whistling from some of the men in the audience, however, unnerved 'her' a little, as she sang a French song in an impressive contralto, probably a light tenor, in 'her' natural voice, now toned down and accented femininely, given the distractions the appreciative audience made her face.

"Who is that?" whispered J.C. to the laughing, applauding captain beside him.

"Ken Browning, the general's son," Mac whispered back as both had to applaud the end of the skit. The 'women' now looked ridiculous in their long gowns, heavy makeup, long earrings and without their wigs. Ken Browning, the Colonel noted, had quite longish fair hair, the privileges of being a Lieutenant-General's son, he guessed.

A country music group followed, before there were more sketches, together with a finale in which all the performers did a little number. Ken Browning looked very handsome in his tailored black tie and tuxedo, singing in English and French in his turn. J.C. was glad to rise and thank the performers, and the men of A Company, for their invitation to the Camp Show. Actually, it had gone on too long, as such things generally do, but the colonel knew his duty and did it well.

Captain Richard Turner was waiting for his father in his quarters by the time that the Colonel returned, after going backstage and speaking to many of the performers. "Good show. Your impersonation of Piaf was superb," he had said to Ken Browning. The blue-eyed, young man, totally unlike his father, had seemed quite startled and flushed at the notice and reference of the Colonel to his performance as a female

"I need your help, Dad," Richard Turner said bluntly, chasing thoughts of the performance by Browning from the Colonel's mind. His son had also helped himself to a rye from his father's 'private' stock. He was settled, too, the older man observed with a smile, in J.C.'s favorite armchair. No, he wasn't a boy any more, was he?

He looks tired, J.C. thought, pouring himself a drink of his own. Little worry lines and creases furrowed the corners of Richard's eyes. His father hoped

they weren't permanent as they made him seem much older than his twenty-seven years.

"Tell me," J.C. instructed his son, with equal terseness.

"We put in a special request this time," his son said bitterly. "We needed a girl, a French speaker. The papers, the cover, even the contacts in Paris have all been made. All we needed was a girl to fit the bill. But the Brits have said, No. No-one over there will co-operate with us." There was rage in his voice.

"Why not?" asked an astonished Colonel, knowing that, as an officer in a different command, he was treading dangerously in asking his son to expound on intelligence work. Exactly which agency his son had been seconded to, he wasn't sure, and really didn't want to know.

The Colonel didn't think he ought to know but Richard persisted in coming to him for advice and help. The different agencies bickered as if they were rivals for a pretty woman's hand. "The Bank", Richard's term for his own agency, had to rely upon others, notably the British spy services for a supply of agents. Then, he had problems in knowing how much to depend on such agents and whether they reported solely to 'The Bank' or to other agencies first.

"The Dutch network was turned," Richard said gloomily. "After all the work we put in, we have to take the blame for that, as well as for the loss of twelve agents on the ground."

"So, no-one trusts your abilities any more?" asked the Colonel in surprise. He knew the 'brains' in Richard's outfit only by university assessments. But they had astonished him with the strength, or so he thought, of their credentials. John Turner had thought that they were all first-class. He'd expected soon to hear of great things that his son was involved in.

"They say that we've been infiltrated," Richard said bitterly.

"Have you?" asked J.C. sharply. That was cause for disbanding 'The Bank' right there.

"No!" exclaimed Richard, startled by his father's sharpness. "At least, we don't think so. We think one of the Dutch agents was turned."

J.C. nodded thoughtfully. "And you need agents to run?" he asked.

"Yes," said Richard irritably. "We have to send in a contact to our Paris network in two weeks or our prime source will be cut off from us. And nobody will supply us with agents. The Library's been trying to take over this agent of ours for a year as our source supplies accurate evaluations of German strength and deployments in Northern France."

"You must have been in contact with others," began the Colonel carefully.

"She, our agent, the one the Brits wanted most, was killed in a car accident outside Paris," said Richard. "We verified the circumstances," he added quickly. "There's no doubt the accident was exactly that. We haven't told the Brits that she's gone. But we do have to replace her, and fast."

"The Free French? Other Brit agencies? How about our own or the Canadians?" asked the Colonel. "There must be women ..."

"They won't give us the time of day," said Richard miserably. "The Brits call us a bunch of amateurs and by and large that's true. All the women I've approached have laughed at me and repeated everything the Brits say about us Yanks over here, playing at being soldiers."

Colonel Turner mused for a while. As far as he could see, there was little he could do for his son this time. French-speaking women, trained as agents, were not something he could easily scare up for his son.

"What did you think I could do, son?" J.C.'s voice was gentle.

Richard blinked and looked up from the armchair. His eyes were a little bloodshot and the dark circles beneath them had grown perceptibly in the dim light. He was almost asleep. "I don't know," he admitted with a yawn. "But you've always had ideas about my problems before. I've run out."

"I'll sleep on it, son," said J.C. "And you should, too." He buzzed for his aide who came promptly. "Show Captain Turner a bed, Rick," he said to the young lieutenant who appeared.

When the two were gone, Colonel Turner pulled out the camp bed and settled down himself. Sleep was hard to come by as he mulled over thoughts of French-speaking girls, serving as agents in France. Somehow, each girl he thought of had dark brown hair, cut straight across her forehead. She had a neat, slim figure, and for some reason, in his thoughts she wore an evening gown no matter the occasion. It was only when sleep finally began to overtake him that Colonel John Clayton Turner realized that the girl he was visualizing was in fact Ken Browning.

II. A REPLACEMENT AGENT

His son was still abed when Colonel Turner entered the shack which served as an entertainment center for the men. It was empty of soldiers, the entertainers likely catching extra sack time as they had to perform for other companies in the week ahead. So, they did have the luxury of missing the day's training exercises.

Colonel Turner sat down before a clouded mirror in the store room that now served as a dressing room. Some joker had put a large, yellow, five-pointed star on the outside of the door, which now hung inwards. The Colonel heard the clump of Browning's boots long before the soldier arrived.

"Sir," the young man saluted and held himself at attention in the open doorway. Kelly, as usual, didn't let any grass grow under his, the warrant officer's feet, in having the Colonel's orders followed promptly.

"Come in. Close the door. Sit down." The Colonel's directions were spare and economical. Kenneth Jackson Browning did exactly as he was bid.

"Why is General Browning's son, fluent in French, German and Italian, a one-striper in one of my companies?" Colonel Turner asked, showing the emotionally devoid face that he had practiced and practiced for this interrogation. And it was that. The general would hear about and act upon any over-aggressive actions on his part towards this young son of his

Browning was startled by the blunt question. He flushed a bright red right up to the roots of his

straight blonde hair. It was greased down now so that he appeared almost regulation. His sergeant had an excuse for missing it and could relax, thought the Colonel dryly, but he would have to have a word with him later, well out of the general's son's hearing. He didn't want Browning cutting his hair now and revealing that he had a soldier's cut, not now.

"I'm a soldier, sir," said the young man nervously. Nineteen was his recorded age. That was no answer, of course. Any general's son could expect more consideration than Kenneth Browning had received. He could be an interpreter, with junior officer rank, at least, if he'd told his father that he wanted that. He could have joined the other military, useless layabouts, as Turner thought of them, over here, running about London, chasing every good-looking girl that he could, promising, as the layabouts did, to take her back to the US of A, and make her an actress.

"You were drafted," stated the Colonel, not needing to look at the notes he had made about this handsome, young man. "No commission and not recommended for one. I'd have thought that your father would have done better than that for you."

Again, the young man blushed. Annoying habit, thought Turner. This will be no good if he does it each time he's embarrassed.

"He would have done a lot for me, Colonel, sir," Browning said, looking down at his black, polished boots. "I didn't want any favors, though, least of all from him."

The tone told Colonel Turner everything he wanted to know. The pair did not get along which would leave him a free hand in what he was going to do. "Good," he snapped, hiding a smile when the young man's eyes jerked up to look at him. He had the same Mediterranean blue eyes as his father, but General Mark Jackson Browning was dark-haired and sallow. Ken Browning was fair, his eyelashes almost white, and he didn't look as if he shaved yet. His cheeks were hollowed, almost gaunt, while his uniform looked like it was made for a much bigger man. Likely, Browning had been bigger before he began Warrant Officer Kelly's 'Instant Soldier' training exercises.

"Why did you volunteer for the show last night?" asked the Colonel abruptly.

Browning flushed again. "Well, you know, sir," he finally said, stumbling over the words. "All we're doing is training, training, training."

Turner smiled. "And everyone is saying that there won't be any action, until, at least, a year from now?" he asked, venturing a smile, that seemed to show the young man that he was on his side. Oh, he'd learn not to trust such advances, like that, in time, the young man would. "Is that how the grunts have it worked out? Well, maybe I can do something about that. I'm about to offer you, son, a chance to take part in one of the damndest, strangest assignments of this war. I believe that you can handle it."

The boy gaped at his commanding officer. But there was an eager gleam in his eyes. Smiling again, Colonel John Turner knew that his fish had taken the bait already. Now, he'd have to play it out and tangle the fish in the line the colonel would feed him. Then, it would be too late for Browning but to do what the Turners wanted.

"We need a person," the Colonel began, but then shook his head. "No, I'll give it to you straight from the start."

The boy had not moved but his quick nod told Turner that his fish was well and truly hooked.

"My son, Captain Richard Turner," J.C. said slowly, taking out and beginning to fill his pipe, "belongs to an Intelligence outfit. He arranges for agents to be dropped behind enemy lines. The agents must be French or perfect in speaking French at the very least. Do you think you could handle a job like that?"

Ken Browning nodded eagerly. It was too easy, thought the Colonel.

"I could handle it," said Browning with a glint in his eye. "I did apply for Intelligence, once before, but I thought they'd turned me down. I thought it was Dad who nixed it."

That shook Colonel Turner. He was about to reconsider and walk away but the boy seemed to read that in his face. "Please, Colonel, sir," he said anxiously. "I'd like nothing better than a chance to prove myself; and any action would be better that waiting round here for years.

"I thought that I'd see action for sure as a G.I., rather than as an officer. My dad would tie me to a desk, I was certain. And he still might. I definitely would not let the General know, in any way, what I was up to. Please, Colonel, use me. Let my dad mess with the lives of my other brothers, not mine."

Ken Browning looked so young, so eager and so innocent that Colonel Turner knew that he would hate himself afterwards for what he was about to do. He stood up and picked up the field telephone at the end of the table. Kelly was at the command post and answered promptly.

"Ask Captain Turner to join me in the entertainment center," said the Colonel into the phone. The young man opposite him looked at him expectantly, a smile fleeting over his full lips, as J.C. replaced the receiver. "What pointed you out to us, Ken," he said with a frown, "was your performance in the show last night. You were very convincing in all your parts."

The young man colored and bit anxiously at his lower lip. "No, don't be embarrassed," the Colonel said as kindly as he could. "It's actually a real advantage to be able to impersonate a woman. It enables you to be more effective as an agent. You can check out places where you'd otherwise be spotted. It's a pity we only have a few agents as effective at disguise as you could be, on occasion, but Dick tells me that they only recruit new people these days who are top-class actors, anyway."

The Colonel's pipe was going well now. He got up and wandered over to where the racks of costumes were kept. "We saw you in an evening gown last night," he said. "But Richard would say that that wouldn't get you by, unnoticed, on a Parisian street. So why don't you put on street clothes for him?" He indicated and outfit of a light blue blouse and a tapered, black skirt. "Richard can see for himself why I think you have an extra dimension for the job."

"Now?" Ken Browning gulped. The blush returned to his face. Well, he could never have expected this conversation to go in this direction, could he, thought the Colonel. "You want me to dress in women's clothes, now?"

The Colonel shrugged, ignoring the lack of a 'sir' in the question. "Dick, a captain without any help from me," said the Colonel, knowing how much he was lying to the young man, "will be here soon. It will surprise him if you can show him one effective disguise, not glamorous or obvious, but effective."

"But I-I," stammered Browning uncertainly.

"Use a different wig to last night," said the colonel, going to the door and leaving the youth with the skirt over his trembling arm. "Join us on the stage when you are ready and remember to speak only in French."

The Colonel was just in time to intercept his son and draw him off, to the raised stage area of the Quonset hut, before Richard went barging into any of the side rooms of the 'entertainment center'. He manoeuvred his son to sit down at the coffee table on the stage "for a chat about your problems". He let Richard go through a litany of his complaints before he finally said, "I may have solved a part of your problem for you."

Richard looked at him with suspicion. "I thought of something myself," he said miserably. "We saw that woman on stage last night, speaking impeccable French. You weren't thinking of proposing her to me, were you, Dad? Did you know that 'she', as a matter of fact, is Ken Browning, the general's son?"

"She's exactly whom I was going to suggest," said Colonel John Turner, using the same smile that had worked so well, or so he believed, on the other young man, or rather, he'd have to start thinking, on the other young woman.

"Browning?" Richard Turner asked, disbelief written on his face. His father's face, accompanied by a nod, gave away that the Colonel had thought of that as well as his son had. "A female impersonator?" he asked in even greater disgust as his father smiled.

"Dad, this is too important for silly games." He might have said more but J.C. could see that his son was very annoyed with him.

The Colonel took his time, adding a little more to his pipe as his son glowered at him. "All right," he said. "Not Ken Browning, though that's a very good idea. There's one of my file clerks I want you to meet. Her French is impeccable."

Richard's expression changed to one of interest. His father settled back into one of the stage's canvas chairs and puffed away contentedly. The old man had something up his sleeve, his son was certain, but he didn't know what it was.

Then the girl came out of the dressing room area onto the stage. She was tall for a girl in her high heels, but she carried herself well. Her figure was slender, almost angular, like so many girls these days on their inadequate diets over here in England. Her fair hair was cut short and brushed to one side as so many of the 'Waves' were wearing it now. It was definitely in style for Britain, but she'd have to change it, to something more femininely stylish, if she crossed the Channel.

She wasn't in uniform but wore a dark, straight skirt and a blouse that hinted at curvature at her chest. Her waist was very pinched in. She was one of the very few Richard had seen lately who was wearing real silk stockings on her slim, otherwise bare and shapely legs. She wasn't wearing much makeup, few girls did these days, just red lipstick and mascara or eyeliner, he thought.

"Come here, Marie ma cherie," said the Colonel cheerfully, switching to his poor French. "This is my son, Richard, whom I told you about."

The girl appeared flustered. She looked at the Captain who had risen politely from his seat, but she was the one who nervously dropped her eyes. She was wearing dark eyeshadow on her eyelids, Richard noted. "On parle francais?' he asked.

"Bien sur, monsieur," she replied, using nasal inflection as if she was a born Frenchwoman.

"Did my father," said Richard in French, "speak to you of the danger of parachuting into Occupied France and serving as an agent, a spy, there?"

She flushed and nodded. Well, thought the Colonel, 'she' must be really eager to get involved in this war. She should wait, as she was a man. There was going to be a lot of need for infantrymen and very soon. Yes, Turner knew a lot more than any G.I. knew about what was coning and how soon it was likely to be coming.

There was a lot more to be said and a lot of training to go through, before 'she' would be allowed into France anyway. Turner should speak of the possibility of death and torture, but he didn't want to scare off a possible future agent with horror tales. She'd inevitably hear anyways, and 'she' had an obvious way out, didn't 'she'? She'd just have to take off her wig, or her dress, and show what was in her panties.

Richard Turner sighed, causing the 'girl' to look at him apprehensively. But he'd bought into it, his father saw, as the girl twisted sexily on the chair, her lovely, girlish legs crossed. It would take so long to train up a woman, yes, thought the colonel, watching his son's face. He started thinking as his son might, of bringing this 'woman', physically, to the standards, that even a young G.I. had, in unarmed combat. Never mind, 'she' was used to having to work a radio, he'd read 'her' work record, where she had

done a hundred and one other things any military man was prepared to do. Still, if 'she couldn't be used now, the Colonel could tell his son, Richard could use 'her' later if the Brits and French proved intractable.

"She understands all that," said the Colonel as Richard started going through the list of things that a woman must learn to do before she went into another country in wartime, the things she must learn. The way the Colonel said it, the smug way he looked at 'Marie' triggered something in Richard's brain. Something was afoot here that he didn't understand. It concerned the young woman he had helped to sit down, her perfume, Lily of the Valley, he thought, really delightful.

She re-crossed her legs and gave the Colonel a shy smile. "Well, Marie," encouraged the Colonel in his atrocious French. "Tell us about yourself. How old are you?"

It was something about the way she straightened herself, as the Colonel spoke, that telegraphed itself to Captain Turner. It was the signal that she had made to his father. It was a soldierly gesture, pushing out the small mounds on her chest. "I am nineteen, monsieur," she said. "And I would love the chance of returning to my homeland."

The Colonel smiled as it then struck Richard where he had seen a woman behaving like that and making a gesture like that. "You're Browning," he said suddenly, the anger pouring out of him. He could feel the blood pounding at his temples. "You're the General's son."

The fair-haired girl pushed her chair back, uncrossing her legs. She looked scared and as if she was about to run away.

"Hang on, Dick," said J.C., reaching over and touching the girl's arm gently so that she swung around to him, her eyes still showing great terror. "This was all my idea, if you must know." His black eyes were angry as well, but he was directing it at his son. "You must admit that Ken fooled you completely. If it hadn't been for our conversation, and you seeing the show last night, and thinking how well Ken took the part of a French girl, you'd have taken Marie on here right away, as an agent, wouldn't you?"

Captain Richard Turner looked at the girl beside him and had to admit that what his father said was true. He would not have known by just looking at her that she was not anyone, any woman, that is, but the woman that she had said that she was. "All right," he said intently. "All right, Marie, fool me some more. Tell me whatever story you have cooked up with my father and convince me that you were born a girl."

Ken Browning's training was both rapid and strange. There was a great deal of work done on disguise as different kinds of Frenchmen. He had to spend a day, when he was disguised, in his role, without being discovered by the team that was looking for him. The first outing he spent as a Free French 'caporal' in a tiny Devonshire village. Later, he learned from the umpires that he had been blown, after about four hours, but they let him finish out the day. After that, he spent days as a gardener and as a taxi-driver, each with an objective in view. He was spotted by the 'defenders' each time before he delivered the message he was given.

The day he spent as 'Denise' was his only perfect day. It was so strange and disturbing to have to re-

port to a woman officer who made no bones about how silly it was for him to be disguised as a woman. But she made him dress completely in padded bra and panties as well as corset and stockings as he had to travel up to London, disguised as a WAAC, with eager soldiers trying to accost him, even carrying his pretty luggage packs for 'her' to 'her' taxi. Kenneth had not had to dress completely in women's underwear for his parts on the stage, nor to remove all his body hair, but the woman officer insisted that he do it for the London exercise, seeming to take great pleasure in his obvious embarrassment and discomfort.

Kenneth tried to pretend it was a part in a play. He steeled himself to put on stockings and panties and a corset. It was just going to be a sketch, like the ones he'd done in the show, where he had worn sexy women's lingerie, over his swimming trunks. But he wasn't allowed to wear them any more. He wiggled in the skirt and ladies' panties that he had to wear, as he did the model walk that an actress in 'drama school', had showed them all. Yes, there was the trick to sashaying like a woman, making his tush swing and sway.

So, 'Denise' was out in the audience in a skirt and women's underclothing, madeup and wearing a wig. From that very first time, men seemed willing to ignore his disguise and his little mistakes and treat him as the woman he was trying to present to them.

Denise had a dozen offers to the theater or the cinema which embarrassed 'her' no end, being asked out on dates by so many men. He knew what it was, however, that caused that. The woman officer had plucked his eyebrows unmercifully and had not stinted on his makeup, even if it wasn't theatrical. A glance in a mirror on the train and he saw a thin, girlish face. Yes, she was able to cross her legs just like the other girls. She was finally able to relax a little

when she realised that all the other girls on the train were being propositioned by men as well. And no, they weren't expected to accept the invitations they received.

At the hotel, 'she' had found out that 'she' was sharing with another woman, a WAAF officer, who wanted Denise to double date with her. Denise had to change, replenish 'her' makeup and then get away from the other woman to scout the London night club where the 'game' was to be concluded. Being a woman, all day, was harrowing as 'her' nerves were on edge. Being a French corporal in De Gaulle's divisions was much easier. Controlling Denise's voice and her dress and mannerisms, thinking like a woman all day, was hard. 'She' only felt a little excitement as she realized she was getting away with it! Everyone addressed 'her' as if she really was Denise.

Then, when Denise re-met the woman she was sharing with, she had a message for Denise from Captain Turner. 'She' had to persuade the WAAF girl to get her boy friend and his friend to double date Denise. Then, 'she' had to smile and cajole her 'date' to take Denise to the right club where, not only was she not discovered, but she delivered the message intact.

Later, she had to change in front of her girl friend, put on new, clean, fragrant underclothing and a silky sort of dark dress that Denise's date admired from the start and was always touching. She had to dance with him, Denise's date, of course, and try to encourage him until she had delivered the message. 'She' actually got to dance with one of her puzzled opponents, searching for 'her' in the game being played, her glamorous makeup and padded figure fooling the man completely. Yes, he wanted to be her 'boy friend' as well, and take her home, for a little romp with a 'hero of the skies'