



Jacqueline Kennedy

By Robin Douglas-Home

I want to switch the scene now to my next meeting with Jacqueline Kennedy. It was on 15th November 1963 when I was in New York and I telephoned her. She asked me to come down to spend the afternoon with her at the new country retreat she had had designed and built in Virginia, near Rattlesnake Mountain.

Mrs. Kennedy was sitting on the patio in the afternoon sunlight, overlooking the sweep of fields and hills visible from the house. I had wondered what changes, if any, there would be in her since our last meeting almost a year previously. The first change I noticed was a trivial one, but for some reason it has stuck in my mind: instead of her usual L&M she was smoking menthol cigarettes. The second change was much more fundamental: she was immediately more relaxed, more outwardly composed and happy, than at any time in our previous meetings.

As always in our friendship, the twelve-month gap might not have existed: our dialogue continued as if never interrupted.

New Humility

Our conversation during those seven or eight hours assumes great importance in retrospect. For her, it was evidently a necessary outpouring, but this time with a marked difference. There was a new composure. Gone was much of the bewilderment, the repressed frustration, the acidity, and—yes—even the bitchiness that had run through her conversations of the previous year. To put it rather cruelly, I suppose one could summarise it by saying she had clearly “grown up a lot” in that year; a batch of her pet illusions

Part Two

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had been shed, she was learning to accept that her ideals were just not all one hundred per cent attainable one hundred per cent of the time. Some of the arrogance had gone: there was a new humility in its place. The moods were less shifting, the wit less biting, the flares of aggression dimmed and deeper.

It did not take much talk to discern the background for this change in her. It was only three months previously

that her newly-born son Patrick had died. The birth, and then the death, of that child unquestionably seems to have acted as a kind of catalyst in the relationship between Jacqueline Kennedy and her husband. His reaction to the child's death, as recounted by her . . . her own reactions to his . . . This tragedy brought them closer together than ever before, to a new plateau of understanding, respect and affection. The way she touched the rocking-chair in the sitting-room . . . the way she described his fresh awareness of how lucky he was to have the two children she had borne him successfully, how much he valued their presence, watched their growing-up with fascination, groped for their love and approval and acceptance, treasured their moments of intimacy together. Paradoxically, Patrick's death had brought new life to their marriage and had also strengthened their self-sufficiency as a family. She had never been happier.

Tiny Sacrifice

DURING THESE HOURS of conversation, we talked about the President's trip to Texas the following week. If she were to accompany him, it would be her first public outing since the death of Patrick. She said to me, in so many words: "Jack knows I hate that sort of thing. But all he said to me was 'I'd love you to come with me, but only if you really want to come. You would be a great help to me. But if you don't want to, I will quite understand.' So now I'm quite firm in my decision to go to Texas even though I know I'll hate every minute of it. But if he wants me there, then that's all that matters. It's a tiny sacrifice on my part for something that he feels is very important to him."

She went with him to Texas. One week later, almost to the hour, she was a widow.

Invitation to Visit

SOME TWO MONTHS later, at a mutual friend's instigation, I telephoned her at her new home in Georgetown, Washington. The upshot of this conversation, and another that followed some days later, was that she asked me to visit her the next weekend when I

was going to be staying at the British Embassy.

She had told me over the telephone of her horrific experiences during the assassination; how she had literally to hold the President's head together and hide his wounds with the bouquet of roses she had been given. But even at his murder she noted her husband's bravery: "Governor Connally was squealing like a stuck pig: Jack never made a sound."

So when we met, there was nothing more to be said about the assassination itself. We did not discuss it at all. Instead, we talked about what she would and could do about the children, about her decoration of the Georgetown house, and how annoying it was that the permanent crowd of sightseers could see into her bedroom and almost watch her getting out of bed and dressing. Not surprisingly, she did not know which way to turn or to whom to turn. But nonetheless she showed sufficient and recognisable reservoirs of strength to convince me that, whatever the horror and pressures of the moment, she would eventually conquer them all and emerge triumphant. What I did not foresee was that her inevitable triumph might be misplaced, misguided, or— even worse—misdirected, even possibly to the detriment of the one person's memory she wished to hallow and enhance.

An Empty Husk

THE SECOND TIME I saw her after the assassination was for an evening drink.

A very tired Robert Kennedy came in looking like a ghost, grey-eyed, a shadow of the man I had interviewed for the *Daily Mirror* some days before the assassination. If anything, he was leaning as much on Jacqueline Kennedy as—if not more than—she was leaning upon him.

But she too, seemed incapable of emotion, an empty husk of a woman who confessed to me that her core was utterly "dried up." And yet it was I, and not she, who commented how awful it was that Lyndon Johnson should have succeeded her husband as President. She said "Oh, he's not as bad as all that—after all, he's got all Jack's advisers. So how can he go

wrong?" At that stage anyway she had no outward animosity towards Johnson: it may have been—understandably—latent, but certainly she never showed it, and even went out of her way to praise the Johnsons for being so considerate about the time it would take her to move out of the White House.

Changing View

THIS was January 1964. And it was three months later, in April, that she gave the famous ten-hour interview on tape to William Manchester. In January, even if she were comparatively balanced in her attitude towards Lyndon Johnson, she was definitely unbalanced about other things. By April, I think that imbalance must have come to a head when, as one commentator put it, she began to think that her murdered husband was being forgotten and that Lyndon Johnson was being praised as a President who could get legislation through Congress that her own idolised husband had merely dreamed about getting through Congress.

It was then, I think, that she temporarily lost her balance. (Whatever her outward loyalty to Lyndon Johnson as her husband's Vice-President, Johnson to her and her husband had always been a bit of a private joke. But when Lyndon Johnson not only succeeded her husband but—horrible dictu—began to overhaul him both in the popularity polls and in terms of political achievement, he ceased to be a joke. He became a challenge to her dead husband's memory because she thought him unworthy of the praise and popularity he was earning.)

Backs RFK

SHE HAD BEEN prepared to accept Lyndon Johnson as a successor to her husband so long as Johnson was seen to continue to live in the shadow of John F. Kennedy. But once he started to exceed that brief, and overshadow him in the public mind, her emotional subconscious erupted. She would not accept it. Furthermore, the solid support and constant proximity of Robert Kennedy during the post-assassination months must have led her to believe that the best way of serving

her dead husband was to back his brother—his rightful political heir—and to further his cause in any way she could.

She thought—wrongly—that she had failed her husband in his life, had failed to give him the full, unstinting support she could have given and that he expected her to give. But now, now, she was determined to give him, posthumously, all that support. And more. She was trying to make good her imagined deficiencies during his lifetime. And the clearest and easiest way to do this was to help her brother-in-law, whom she clearly identified with her husband, to carry on re-creating the dreams so dear to her husband and which he had been prevented from achieving by his premature death.

As time went by after the assassination, and as she brooded more and more about it (which she did because she restricted her social life to the minimum and only saw friends with whom she could discuss her late husband), I think she came to feel more and more inadequate as a wife to the late President. And she became absolutely determined to make amends. Hence her agreement to the writing of the Manchester book. Hence her mistake over what she said to Manchester.

Destiny's Recompense

[SO WILLY-NILLY, probably without realising the political implications, she has lent her invaluable support to the Kennedys' campaign to recapture the White House. Emotionally, she was, and is, in tune with the move. But, if she pauses a moment to think, I suspect that intellectually she is not. I have emphasised how much she hates the political machine, all its corruptible power and trappings. And had she stopped to think, she would have realised, if Robert Kennedy ever does recapture the White House, it will be Ethel Kennedy (with whom she has little affinity) and not she who will be in the centre of the stage.]

My conversations with her enable me, I think, to throw some light on her motives in first of all giving the Manchester interview on the record, and then subsequently retreating and

making a legal issue of it, with all the resultant sensationalism and commercialism that the authorisation of the book and the giving of the interview was specifically meant to obviate. Of course, I do not for a moment consider that the authorisation of the book was intended by the Kennedy political machine to "prevent sensationalism and commercialism." Quite the opposite, in fact.]

Jacqueline Kennedy, because she is so emotionally involved and thus can be forgiven for forsaking her customary position of cool, clear logic, uninfluenced by brazen political motives, has been used as a weapon in this exercise. Because she—perhaps understandably—equates the return of a Kennedy to the White House, not only as a sort of expiation for her own imagined shortcomings as a wife to John Fitzgerald Kennedy, but as destiny's recompense to her and to his family for his murder.

Powerful Appeal

MASS emotions, obviously, inevitably, play a large part in the politics of democracies. Jacqueline Kennedy commands a totally disproportionate amount of mass appeal: whether she likes it or not, she has that power, that appeal, that influence. And, contrary to her natural inclinations, she now seems prepared to use it.]

For her own sake, I hope she quits the power game. For she cannot, she is not built, to stand the political heat. She should get out of the political kitchen. And I think she will serve her rightly beloved late husband's memory better if she does. Politics are not for her: and she is not for politics.]

[Let the other Kennedys continue to scabble for the toys of power she so rightly despises. She must live her own life. Secretly Jacqueline Kennedy knows this too.]

Robin Douglas-Home is a nephew of Sir Alec Douglas-Home, Britain's former Prime Minister. He was a frequent guest at the British Embassy in Washington when the former Sir David Ormsby-Gore, now Lord Harlech, was Ambassador. His article about Mrs. Kennedy appeared in the February issue of Queen magazine. These excerpts are reprinted by permission.