

8

Lance Harper, His Story

What's a classic? Lance Harper wondered. He was sitting in a bar watching television the night he wondered this for exactly the millionth time. And, surely, with the millionth assault on this intractable question, Lance's feeling for it could be said to have passed from passion to monomania. If so, it could account for what happened.

Sometimes he used to say to his mother, 'I don't know why I'm living, Mum.' And she, hearing that he was no more than half-joking, was proud that Lance was not like other boys, and did not even think, You were an accident, Lance.

But he mightn't have cared, anyway. What is a classic? That was the point. He had hoped, when the whole question of classics presented itself to him, that as he was going on

twenty-one, five feet eleven and still growing, his last wisdom tooth almost through, the answer was an instinctive thing like all the rest, and one morning he would wake up knowing. But he hadn't.

Now, anyone observant could have seen he wasn't well: he seldom smiled, his naturally deep-set, dark-grey eyes receded, melancholy, under his brow. But, of course, one of the facts of Lance's life was that it had never contained a soul who had dreamed of observing him. And his heavy frame, hollowed out by restless days and listless nights, looked healthy enough as he swung along the girders of each new skyscraper.

'He's a fabulous colour,' his mother, Pearl, told her boss, running up another red Christmas stocking on the machine. 'Fabulous tan. And his hair's all yellow with the sun.'

'Got a girl?' Bert measured off red cloth.

'No. His mum's the only girl Lance's interested in.'

Bert paused and looked at her.

'That's all right! You can scoff! He's working overtime to pay off a new fridge for me, and he's trading in his car for a new one so I can be comfortable when we go out.'

'I'll get some more of that cotton,' said Bert, disappearing.

So that close, hostile look of perplexity on Lance's face was never remarked. It was his habitual way of looking and was mistaken for the quizzical squint the sun gives most Australian men. Lance's dad had it, too, but with him it really was the sun.

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He was a builder by trade, like Lance, and swarmed over scaffolding in all weathers.

When Lance was five his mother went away one night without him, just stopping to hiss in his dark room, 'Yes, I'm going, love. Dad's sending me away. He says you both like Myrna Barnes better than Mum. What? You don't? Well, someone's telling lies to poor old Mum. I'm off, anyway, Lance. Do what Mrs Barnes tells you.'

And his father said, 'What? Where's she gone? What? I'll give you a good clip on the ear if I hear any more out of you. Get out into the back yard! Go on!'

About once a year after that, his mum or dad left home forever. The period of absence varied, and sometimes Lance was taken, sometimes kept, but the departures were fairly predictable and made quite a stable feature in his life.

He was invariably placed on one side of the dispute as if by some impartial referee: now he was Dad's boy, now Mum's. But sometimes, in odd moments of reconciliation, it struck his parents that Lance was a boy who kept things up too long—a moody boy, nice-looking but not nice. And sometimes they combined to chide him for his lack of friends. Not that *they* had any friends, but occasionally they felt it would be normal and flattering to them if Lance would extend himself and acquire a few.

If he did not approve of them, let him be better!

But Lance took up no challenges. His mind seemed always

to be, whatever the subject in front of him, deeply concentrated on something else. He was never at a loss for thought. In the house there was always something to set his mind turning: egg stuck to the ceiling where plates of breakfast had been hurled; scars on Mum's hands where she was burned while wrestling with Dad and a pot of beans in boiling water; the scar above his own right eyebrow where an ashtray had hit him once; a broken record player; a slashed bike tyre.

Pearl was away when Lance had his fifteenth birthday and started work. In due course she brought home her circled eyes, her case full of shocking-pink nighties and underwear, and found a new vacuum cleaner from Lance tied up in cellophane in the hall, and a bottle of French perfume on her oak dressing table. And that was only the beginning. She had had no idea Lance was so fond of her. He gave presents to his father, too, at first—tools and fishing gear and shaving kits. What a generous boy!

As a family the Harpers had often been hard up. It wasn't simple to pay off the television set, piano, two transistor radios, a Model Homes electric stove, two electric shavers, a portable typewriter, a car, and furniture, all at once. But Lance worked overtime, and paid his mother more than amply for his bed and food. He was a real help. She took a new notion to him.

(Their house was a wooden one and quite old, but not set in deep suburbia. The rent was small; it was close to the city and, really, very snug.)

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Once, when he was on night shift and supposed to be sleeping by day in the empty house, Lance went to town and came back with a large dictionary. Looking up every second word—words like ‘polemic’ and ‘rapprochement’—he read from cover to cover a serious-looking political weekly from London. He’d heard students talking about it one day at a railway station bookstall. It was in English. He could not, naturally, locate definitions of cartoons or the groups signified by initials alone, but at first he did find all the other words. It was the best dictionary in the biggest bookshop in Sydney.

Apart from what he made out to be political stuff by the way the names of the countries kept turning up, Lance saw that the weekly covered such topics as: Correspondence, the Arts and Entertainment, Books, Reviews, Food and Wine, and Positions Vacant. To begin with, chewing hard on a wooden tooth cleaner (he didn’t smoke), Lance looked up most of the words in these sections, too. He also made a pot of coffee and drank more than he wanted.

But the definitions often turned out to be as arid and abstruse as the original terms, and Lance was obliged to penetrate so far in search of the truth of each word, chasing it through all the brand-new pages, that he began to flag at the thought of the return journey to the text. There was a loss of heart somewhere in the room, or in the weather, and Lance glanced over his shoulder at the sky. ‘I’m getting fed up with this,’ he said aloud.

Let it be understood that Lance wasn't stupid! Ages ago in infants' school he had often been top, or near the top, of his class, without trying. Even in high school, in second year, which was as far as he went, he alone of all the forty in the room had solved a certain, very difficult, problem in algebra one day. Think of that! Lance often did.

For several hours now he linked meaning to meaning, rewriting pages of the ninepenny weekly. Then he chewed another stick of medicated wood and read his reconstruction. This was in English, too.

He couldn't understand a single sentence.

And, finally, he had to admit that it was all, all of it, even the vacant jobs, joined to a past, a present, to people, places, and things, that he was more ignorant of than the man in the moon. He was old enough to fight and die in a war at this time.

One evening, not long afterwards, having in the meantime abandoned the dictionary in a bus, Lance was watching television, eating an apple, and painting his toenails with his mother's clear polish. The bottle happened to be on the arm of the chair he'd fallen into. Also, it was partly because (leaving aside his abstraction) he was wearing on his feet those plastic sandals, presumably modelled on Mercury's, that disfigured thousands of Sydney feet that summer, and which were called, without much splitting of hairs, thongs, tongs, or prongs, according to the mood of the speaker. But the point is that they left Lance's

toenails bare, which was why he painted them when the lecturer talked on television about classics.

Lance came in at the tail end of this programme, just as the man said, 'Now for the summing-up.' He listened quite idly at first, but it would be no exaggeration to say that afterwards Lance was a man possessed. The speaker had really smouldered with conviction, using all his force to prove that a man who knew his classics knew everything worth knowing.

'Good heavens, Lance, don't let your father catch you with paint on your toenails!'

Lance said, 'I never noticed,' and went to his room with cotton wool and polish remover. In fact, though, he and his father hadn't spoken a word to each other in eighteen months. It wasn't likely his feet would have started them talking.

In a clean white shirt, in a new tie and suit, Lance set out for an evening class advertised in Saturday's big paper along with movies and nightclubs—the first of a course of ten lectures. He had a mushroom omelette in a restaurant near the lecture hall, and his hand shook when he stirred his coffee. It was a pity he didn't smoke.

When he looked at his watch, a man with a briefcase sat down opposite. Lance felt his mind drop suddenly, glide, fall, and swoop back to position. He said, 'You're Harold Jefferson. I saw you on TV.'

Harold Jefferson looked up. He was a remarkably handsome man and good at his job. 'Yes, I did give a talk recently.'

Then he ordered a meal and took some papers from his briefcase, not glancing up again, his equable spirit quivering at the echo of that bald address, the mental picture of that watch and suit, so spruce and naïve, and, above all, at that look in the brilliant deep-set eyes of the fellow across the table. It had been an immensely stupid look of something like veneration—because *he* was a television ‘personality’!

‘I’d like to ask you something, if you don’t mind.’

Oh, really! Harold thought. He was a nervous man of kindly instincts, but his most natural instinct now was to jump heavily on whoever it was prostrated before him. This silly character (probably some would-be Elvis Presley hoping for television contacts) was humble, honoured *him*, Harold Jefferson, and for the wrong reasons! How despicable it made him seem!

‘If *you* don’t mind,’ he murmured, not looking up. ‘I’m lecturing tonight.’ Harold did have charm, but he did like to discriminate a little in its use.

‘Yes, I know. I’m going to be there. Mr Jefferson, you talked about the classics. You said they could make a man free, and sort of rich in himself. I liked that. I never heard anything like it before.’

Harold had to smile with pleasure and shame. He couldn’t help but feel himself to be the charmed one now. These rough diamonds! You read about them and dismissed them, but they did have a certain ingenuous something.

He said, 'I'm glad you liked it,' and allowed himself the licence of comparing their probable backgrounds: there was no doubt that that fellow's would be the richer materially. Harold had gone from a Midlands town to Oxford on a government grant. In *this* fellow's background he divined quite easily (couldn't he see a more expensive suit than he had ever owned?) the latest car, the typewriter no one could use, the piano no one could play and, probably, he thought, a large dog no one exercised.

Lance said, 'What's a classic?' And Harold grew pink, and got pinker, though his expression didn't alter. He'd been made a fool of! Either he was chatting with an imbecile or he was being taken for a fool! Probably because he was English.

But no, he realised slowly. This poor chap was genuine, all right. What a pity! But even so!

Against his will, Harold started to smile. He had been working hard, correcting examination papers, preparing lectures, trying to persuade a girl in London to come out and marry him. He was tired. He simply had to laugh.

Lance went to earth like someone mortally wounded. He put down some money and walked out into the street towards the nearest bar.

Still laughing, but half-rising in alarm to restrain him, Harold Jefferson called his apologies, dropped his briefcase, stooped to collect his papers, and lost his man.

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'Mum, I've signed on to a ship. I'm leaving on Friday. I'm going to the States on Friday.'

'What? Leaving me, son? You're all I've got, Lance, love.'

'*He's* still here. And I've got you a big dog so you won't be lonely.'

'A dog? How'll I feed it, Lance?'

'I don't know, Mum—with meat, I guess. I'll send you money.'

'I don't want a dog. I want you! You're all I've got.'

'No, I'm not, Mum. You'll like a dog.'

Pearl had shut herself away to cry for several hours. Lance didn't change his mind, though.

Across America he picked fruit and hiked and found odd jobs. In England, a man in a Chelsea pub said two words to him he would never forget: 'juxtapose' and 'machinations'. Lance often remembered the talk they had.

He spent quite a lot of time with women, and went quite off his mother. I'm all she's got *now*, he used to think. But he went home after two years, arriving around Christmas time. He took his mother Scotch woollies and things, forgetting the Sydney climate in December. The temperature was about a hundred and four in the shade. But Pearl was more than happy, sobbing half the day, and showing him off to the neighbours at night. The dog had got lost. His father was in hospital.

These days Lance drank more than he used to, and talked more, too. His mother thought this a big improvement. Her

LANCE HARPER, HIS STORY

Lance was fascinating, in a way. The way he said, for instance (so peculiar, really, she couldn't think what he meant), 'No one could tell me what a classic is, Mum. I asked them all.'

'A classic, love? I didn't know you wanted to know.'

'Of course I did! Of course I did!' She seemed so silly to him, he thought she must be drunk. His own mother! Never mind!

That night he wandered the Sydney streets, and wound up in a bar watching television. It was here he asked his question for the millionth time. Afterwards, though he went over and over the scene in his mind, he could never be sure of his reason for throwing a bottle through the screen, and all the rest...

Lance got three months for this effort, and a further three later on, for assaulting a guard. That sounds worse, that last bit, than it really was. Lance and the guard were friendly; it turned out they'd both sailed on the same ship at one time, so the assault was no more than the token push they'd agreed on.

As buildings go in Australia, the prison was ancient, and none too comfortable, but it was redeemed in Lance's eyes, at least, as anyone will believe, by the fact that an eccentric, now deceased, clerk had bequeathed his vast collection of books, as his will phrased it, 'to those unfortunates incarcerated behind stone walls'.

On the second night of his imprisonment Lance discovered

ELIZABETH HARROWER

in the library shelf upon shelf of a series called *All the Classics* and, accompanying the series, several copies of *The Plain Man's Guide to the Understanding and Appreciation of All the Classics*.

This useful book is now said to be, unhappily, out of print.