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Preface

The King of New York

Just as its owner had intended, the yacht that made its way slowly up Manhattan's East River and docked at the Water Club at East 30th Street in early March 1991 caused a considerable stir. For a start, it was far bigger than any of its neighbours – so big that it took up eight berths instead of the customary one. Four storeys high, gleaming white and topped with a mast bristling with satellite equipment, the yacht could clearly be seen from several blocks away.

The man's identity and the reason for his visit soon became the subject of much excited speculation. In several newspapers it even displaced reports of the end of the first Gulf War from the front pages. Who was this 'portly press baron with the bushy eyebrows, the square jaw and the sly smile,' people wondered.

What little was known about him piqued their curiosity even more. Born to a peasant family in Czechoslovakia, he had apparently fought for the British Army during the War and been awarded one of the country's highest medals for gallantry. Now he was understood to be the possessor of a vast mansion as well as a '40-button portable telephone'. He was also described as 'a symbol of an Age of Flash. Of big-time dreams and big-time deals.'

It seemed that his private life had been scarred by terrible tragedy and his business career by controversy. As for his personal fortune, this was estimated at between a billion and two billion dollars – a figure that was confidently expected to rise by several million by the end of the year. Among the many publications he owned was the *Daily Mirror*, the biggest selling left-wing tabloid newspaper in the UK. This alone gave him enormous political influence. According to Bob Bagdikian, dean of the Berkeley Graduate School

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of Journalism, 'Neither Caesar nor Franklin Roosevelt nor any Pope has commanded as much power to shape the information on which so many people depend.'

New Yorkers would have to wait several more days before they caught their first sight of the yacht's owner. But once seen, he was not easily forgotten. At nine in the morning on 13 March, a convoy of stretch limousines drew up beside a news-stand on 42nd Street. Out of the first limousine stepped an extremely large man dressed in a camel hair coat and a red bow-tie, with a green-and-white-striped cap perched on top of his head.

Showing unexpected nimbleness for someone of his size, he sprang up on to the sidewalk. A crowd of around 300 had gathered to witness his arrival, along with several TV crews. 'Good on you!' one of the onlookers shouted. Another one called for three cheers. As the hurrahs rang out, the man grinned in delight and took off his cap to reveal a head full of startlingly black hair. He twirled the cap in the air, before holding up his other hand for silence.

The cheers died away.

'This is a great day,' he announced in his booming treacly voice. 'A great day for me, but above all for New York. It's the first good thing that New Yorkers have seen happen in a long while. The city has lost confidence in itself. People are departing. I say enough! New York still has something to say. The fact that I have chosen New York is a vote of tremendous confidence in this city.'

Then, holding both arms above his head now, his fists clenched in triumph, he went even further.

'It is a miracle!' he said, 'A Miracle on 42nd Street!'

At this point he was approached by two policemen, who asked if he would mind moving on. The problem, they explained with uncharacteristic deference, was that so many people had come to see him they were spilling out into the road; as a result, lengthy tailbacks were stretching in both directions. Of course, said the man; the last thing he wanted was to cause any inconvenience. Rather than get back into his limousine, he strode away up 42nd Street, his camel hair coat trailing out behind. Far from

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dispersing, the crowd and the TV crews set off in pursuit, loath to let him out of their sight.

The man's name was Robert Maxwell, and this was the day that all his dreams had finally come true.

As he often liked to say later, Maxwell had come to New York in answer to a plea. A saviour was needed in the city's hour of need and Bob the Max, as he'd taken to styling himself, was not about to shirk his duty. This was not strictly true – indeed, it wasn't really true at all – but amid the excitement no one was in any mood to get too hung up on detail.

Eighteen months earlier, in the autumn of 1989, journalists on newspapers in Orlando, Newport, Rhode Island, and Fort Lauderdale were surprised to receive letters asking if they would like to come and work in New York for a while. Anyone who expressed interest was then sent – in strict confidence – a list of instructions on what not to do if they decided to take up the offer:

- Don't stop to talk to anyone who approaches you.
- Don't frequent restaurants in close proximity to the office.
- Don't make eye-contact with passers-by.

At the same time, Jim Hoge, publisher of the *New York Daily News*, launched the first salvo in what he strongly suspected would be a fight to the death. The *New York Daily News* was the oldest and most iconic tabloid newspaper in America. In its heyday, it had sold 2.4 million copies a day – more than a quarter of the city's population.

Brash, blue-collar and fiercely proud of the breadth and depth of its prejudices, the paper liked to style itself 'The Honest Voice of New York', a claim rather belied by the fact that it also ran a regular 'Gang Land' column – a kind of low-life social diary chronicling the ups and downs of the city's best known organized crime figures, such as Vincent 'Chin' Gigante and Anthony 'Gaspipie' Casso.

But the *News's* heyday had long gone. For years, it had been hobbled by astounding levels of over-manning, widespread fraud, an exorbitant wage bill and machinery so antiquated that printers

were reputed to have to blow black ink out of their nostrils for several hours after their shifts had ended. By 1989, it was losing \$2,000,000 a month.

In a bid to break the unions' power, Hoge decided to take them on. He planned his campaign with meticulous precision. If they went on strike, as he was convinced they would, he intended to keep the *News* running with non-union labour – hence his appeal to out-of-town journalists to come to New York. In a former Sears warehouse in New Jersey, he even built a full-scale replica of the paper's newsroom so that people could be properly trained beforehand. The warehouse was surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire and patrolled round the clock by security guards with German shepherd dogs.

The choice was stark, Hoge told the unions. Either they had to accept new machinery and a dramatically reduced workforce, or else the paper was doomed. To no one's surprise, negotiations swiftly broke down. On 20 October 1990, the *News* management dismissed most of its 2,400 unionized employees.

War had effectively been declared.

What followed was described as nothing less than a battle for the beating heart of New York. As well as using non-union journalists, Hoge also employed non-union delivery drivers. Their vans were regularly firebombed by enraged strikers and the drivers beaten up. Journalists who defied the strike were spat at as they passed through the picket line outside the newspaper's offices. Protest rallies were broken up by police in riot gear. Both the Mayor, David Dinkins, and the Archbishop of New York, Cardinal John O'Connor, appealed for calm.

No one took any notice.

Then came Hoge's most inflammatory move. Intimidated by the strikers, many of the city's news vendors had vanished from the streets. In place of the vanished vendors, Hoge recruited homeless people to sell the paper. Predictably enough, this sent the temperature soaring still higher. 'Hoge is using the most desperate group of people in our city to do his dirty work for him,' said George

McDonald, leader of the biggest union, the Allied Printing Trades Council. ‘The next thing you know he’ll be using poor children to peddle his scab rag.’

Advertisers too had melted away. By 11 November 1990 the paper had shrunk to a third of its normal size and had just four full-page advertisements. By 12 December, less than two months into the strike, there had already been 888 ‘serious incidents’, 144 arrests, 66 injuries, 11 people hospitalized and 147 trucks either destroyed or damaged.

Despite his efforts, Hoge had begun to suspect that this was a battle that no one could win. The paper’s owners, the *Chicago Tribune*, indicated that they’d had enough, and wanted to put the *News* up for sale. Just about the only thing that Hoge and McDonald had in common was the hope that someone might appear out of the blue to buy the paper – someone with apparently bottomless pockets and a keen appetite for wielding influence and shaping opinions. As McDonald put it, ‘Owning the *Daily News* is like a visiting card for sheikhs, kings and queens. It opens the door to people.’

By February 1991, the paper was down to just twenty pages and circulation had fallen to less than 300,000. Gloom was so deeply entrenched that scarcely anyone paid the least attention when Robert Maxwell announced that he was interested in buying a US paper valued in ‘the mid-hundreds of millions of dollars’.

And then came another blow. The city’s florists decided en masse not to use the paper to advertise their services in the week leading up to Valentine’s Day – traditionally its most profitable week of the year. On 4 March Hoge issued a statement. ‘The *New York Daily News* will cease publication on March 15th 1991 unless a binding agreement to sell the paper is reached by that date.’

Unbeknownst to all but a few, Maxwell had already sent a representative to New York to sniff the air and make discreet overtures to both Hoge and the unions. Ian Watson was a wiry Scot who edited one of Maxwell’s papers, *The European*. He had his first taste of what might be involved when he took two union representatives out for dinner.

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What no one had thought to tell Watson beforehand was that the paper's distribution had long been controlled by the Mafia. As well as taking a rake-off from sales, they also used its vans to deliver drugs to outlying areas. Over glasses of Chivas Regal, the three men had what Watson considered to be a perfectly amicable conversation about the necessity of accepting staff cuts.

I said to them, "Look gentlemen, we're running out of time here. This paper will close in ten days' time unless we get a deal with you guys. We're the last hope you have."

'When I had finished, neither of them spoke for a while, and then one asked, "Have you ever been to New York before, Mr Watson?"'

Watson said that he had, but not very often.

'He said, "You've been extremely generous to us this evening, Mr Watson. Very generous indeed. And I want to return the favour. If you continue to put pressure like that on us, you and your fat boss will find yourself floating down the Hudson River with your fucking throats cut.'"

They then stood up and left.

Two days later, undeterred by Watson's warnings, Maxwell made his carefully stage-managed entry into New York. The next morning Hoge had his first meeting with Maxwell in the headquarters of the publishers Macmillan on Fifth Avenue – Maxwell had bought the company at the end of 1988 for 2.6 billion dollars.

Whatever Hoge had been expecting, it was not this. "I remember at one point a butler came in with a silver tray with Maxwell's lunch on it. The butler put the tray down in front of him and went out. The next thing I know, I heard a loud crash. I looked up from whatever I was doing and Maxwell had picked up the tray and just dropped it on the floor. The butler came back in and said, "Yes sir?" And Maxwell said, "It's cold. Bring me something else." He then carried on working while the butler started picking everything off the floor. What struck me most was the fact that neither of them acted as if anything remotely unusual had happened.'

To help him in his negotiations, Maxwell summoned a number of people from London. Among them was Richard Stott, the Editor

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of the *Daily Mirror*. When their flight landed, they went straight to Maxwell's yacht, the *Lady Ghislaine* – named after his youngest daughter. There, Stott noticed something that made a big impression on him. Something that only lasted a fraction of a second, but which he found himself thinking about more and more in the months to come.

'As we arrived, Maxwell was showing a group of schoolchildren around. When he saw us a sense of relief and almost pleasure came across his face for an instant, and then the mask was back. I don't think it was because he was delighted to see us especially: it was because we were faces he knew. Just for a moment the loneliness of a man who delighted in meeting everyone and knowing no one showed through. It was the uncertainty and deep insecurity of the true outsider, a man who feels he has been precluded from the world of others and had therefore determined to build his own, with his own rules for his own game.'

The next morning, when negotiations began in earnest, Maxwell took over the top floor of Macmillan and gave each union leader his own office. For the next four days, he scarcely slept, moving constantly from one office to another, subjecting the occupants to a barrage of threats, promises and flattery. The *New York Times* noted nervously that Maxwell had brought 'a dash of British pomp and even a touch of Broadway showmanship' to negotiations. The union leaders seemed just as bemused as Hoge. 'He's certainly got charisma,' said one as he reeled out for a brief respite. 'He's like an English nobleman.'

While no one could doubt how far Maxwell had climbed, there was a good deal of mystery about how he had got there. How had someone from his background developed such a lordly manner and plummy voice? Perhaps inevitably, not all the descriptions were complimentary. Some said he was a terrible bully with the hide of a rhinoceros. There were even rumours that his empire might not be in such blooming good health as he liked to make out, but these too were swept aside in the furore.

At 4.22 p.m. on 14 March, with less than twenty-four hours to go

before Hoge's deadline expired, Maxwell emerged from the Macmillan entrance in his shirtsleeves.

'We have a deal!' he announced.

The news galvanized the city. Outside the paper's offices on 42nd Street, people on the picket lines broke into spontaneous dancing. Cardinal O'Connor offered prayers of thanks, while the Republican Senator for New York, Alfonse D'Amato, chimed in with a biblical analogy of his own. Nothing quite like it had been seen since Lazarus had been raised from the dead, he claimed.

On the face of it, Maxwell had pulled off an amazing coup. But not everyone was convinced. Charlie Wilson, Editorial Director at Mirror Group Newspapers, who had conducted negotiations alongside Maxwell, felt the unions had been given far too many concessions. 'The nearer we came to the deadline, the more he gave them. That took me aback; it was as if his judgement had become clouded or something. I couldn't work out what was going on.'

Wilson wasn't the only one having doubts. Amid his relief that the 139-day strike was finally over, Jim Hoge couldn't suppress a feeling of disquiet, a feeling so strong it was almost a premonition of disaster. 'I could see that Maxwell was prepared to do anything to get it. The unions could see it too, and they'd run rings around him. He would say all this stuff about how he was going to get the circulation to over a million in less than a year, but there was no way he could ever make it work. Basically, he'd bought a death knell.'

Later it would emerge that the *Chicago Tribune* had been so desperate to get rid of the *New York Daily News* that they'd paid Maxwell \$60,000,000 just to take it off their hands. Nothing, though, could dent his delight. This was the moment Maxwell had always longed for. The moment when he had become a true international media baron – a 'Lord of the Global Village'.

To seal his triumph there was one last thing he wanted Hoge to do. 'As soon as the ink was dry on the contract, he said, "I want you to call Rupert Murdoch and tell him that I've bought the *New York Daily News*." When I asked why, he said, "I just need you to tell me what his reaction is."

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‘I said, “Bob, I don’t think that’s very appropriate. Besides, why should the call come from me? Surely, it should come from you?”’

But Maxwell was insistent. ‘“Oh no,” he said. “You’ve got to do it.”’ As it happened, Hoge had a number for Murdoch and managed to get him on the phone. ‘I think he was in Australia so it may well have been the middle of the night. When he answered, I explained to him, “Mr Murdoch, Bob Maxwell would like you to know that he’s just bought the *New York Daily News*.”’

‘I remember there was a long silence and then Murdoch started laughing. He carried on laughing for quite a long time and when he’d finished, he said, “That is so courteous of Bob. Will you thank him from me.”’

Then he hung up.

The first thing next morning Maxwell arrived at the *Daily News* offices to take possession of his new paper. Hoge and the paper’s Editor, Jim Willse, were outside to greet him, standing beneath a huge Art Deco mural depicting a symbolic cross-section of New Yorkers under a lightning-forked sky. This time an even larger crowd had gathered.

‘I love New York,’ Maxwell told them. ‘*I am* a New Yorker! Bob the Max will do his duty!’

Several members of staff were also there, some of them so relieved the strike was over that they were in tears. ‘We’re gonna build it up for you, Mr Maxwell,’ one of them shouted. ‘We’re betting on you.’ Although it was a cold morning and the sun hadn’t yet risen above the skyscrapers, Maxwell was already sweating heavily. Off came the cap again, held aloft for longer this time, as if releasing pressure from a valve.

Photographers jostled to take his photograph. The motor-drives whirred as Maxwell continued to grin from ear to ear. But, for all his outward bonhomie, there was something not altogether convincing about it. ‘I am a jungle man,’ he often liked to say of himself, and the sense of a big beast on the prowl was never far from the surface.

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'Will there be a change of Editor?' one of the journalists asked.

Putting his arm around Willse's shoulders, Maxwell declared, 'This man is my Editor for life!' Then, leaning in closer so that the microphones couldn't pick up what he was saying, he whispered, 'Just remind me of your name again.'

'What will happen to anyone who tries to cross you?' another of the journalists wanted to know.

Maxwell narrowed his eyes, causing his eyebrows – as black as his hair – to inch together. 'You'll get about as much pleasure out of chewing frozen concrete as you will fighting Captain Bob,' he told him.

A woman in the crowd called out that she had brought her baby specially to see him, even though she lived in Crown Heights, more than an hour's journey away on the subway. Greatly moved, Maxwell bent forward and kissed the baby's forehead. Then, doffing his cap one last time, he disappeared through the revolving doors.

The *New York Daily News* lobby is one of the wonders of 1930s design, reputed to be the inspiration for the *Daily Planet* offices in the original *Superman* comics. In the centre of the lobby stands what was once the world's largest indoor globe. Above it is a black-glass domed ceiling representing the infinity of space. Inset in the grey marble floor are brass lines giving the distances to the world's most important capitals: Jerusalem – 5696 miles, Paris – 3634, Mexico City – 2110.

No distances are given to anywhere in the Soviet Union, presumably because few if any Americans in the 1930s would have dreamed of going there. The whole effect is intended to give the impression of standing at the very centre of the Western world – at the same time as emphasizing just how insignificant humans are in the grand scheme of things. Beside the globe is a notice which reads, 'If the sun were the size of this globe and placed here then comparatively the Earth would be the size of a walnut and located at the main entrance to Grand Central Terminal.'

Walking past the front desk, Maxwell asked one of the security guards, a Miss Mackenzie, why she was smiling.

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'I'm just happy, sir,' she told him. 'It's a happy day.'

It would not remain a happy day for Miss Mackenzie for long. Before he stepped into the elevator, Maxwell held up a copy of the *New York Daily News's* front page for the photographers. As soon as they'd finished taking pictures, he dropped the paper on the floor.

Upstairs, Maxwell was shown into his new office. In preparation for his arrival, the bookshelves had been stacked with copies of his official biography, a richly sugared account of Maxwell's life written by his loyal amanuensis, Joe Haines.

His first act was to call in the paper's head of security, a man called Grover Howell.

'You are in charge of security?' he asked.

'Yes, sir,' Howell confirmed.

'Right,' Maxwell told him. 'I'm sacking the paper's entire security staff.'

Howell swallowed.

'Including me?'

'Oh yes,' said Maxwell. 'Including you.'

Just in case the penny hadn't dropped, he added, 'In fact, you are the first person I'm laying off.'

After a stunned Howell had been led away, Maxwell went to address the paper's advertising department. Before he spoke, he looked around the room. 'Why do we have only one coloured person in this department?' he demanded.

Several people stood up.

'Ah, it appears I am colour-blind,' said Maxwell. 'Are minorities well represented here? I will be looking at that.'

Before he went back into his office, one of the *News's* executives told him quietly, 'That was great, Mr Maxwell. Absolutely great. But I thought you should know we call them black here. We don't really call them coloured.'

Maxwell tipped his head.

'Thank you for putting me right.'

In order to announce his purchase of the *New York Daily News* to a wider audience, he had decided to make a television commercial – to

be aired the following evening. He was particularly keen this should be accompanied by suitably rousing music. As far as Maxwell was concerned, there was only one real candidate, the city's unofficial theme song: Kander and Ebb's 'New York, New York'.

Sadly, the rights were not available, one of the ad men informed him. Would he consider using something else, possibly Billy Joel's 'New York State of Mind'?

Maxwell looked at the man as if he was mad.

'Not is not a word that I accept,' he told him.

Picking up the phone, he asked to be put through to the head of Time Warner. 'You are speaking to Robert Maxwell. Have you ever heard of me? No? Well, does the *New York Daily News* ring a bell? I'm the new owner and I need to use "New York, New York" in our television commercials. What are your rules for licensing in an emergency? I don't have time to be pushed from pillar to post here. I want to pay a decent price; I'm not a schnorrer, but I'm not to be ripped off either . . . You can do that? Good, thank you. You've made my day.'

After banging the phone down, Maxwell did something that caused even more confusion. With no warning, he fell fast asleep. A good deal of whispered discussion followed about whether he should be woken or not. Before a decision could be taken Maxwell opened his eyes.

'The Prime Minister wants to speak with you,' another of his associates told him.

Maxwell looked around.

'Which one?' he asked.

That afternoon another incident occurred that made a big impression on Jim Hoge – and which he too would find himself reflecting on in the light of subsequent events. 'At one point my secretary ran into my office, white as a sheet. Apparently Mr Maxwell was very upset and wanted to see me straight away. When Maxwell came in, he said, "Look, you've got to help me out." He was pacing around and I could see he was embarrassed about something. Eventually,

he said, ‘Would you mind if I stood here with the door open and shouted at you for a while?’

‘I told him to go ahead. Immediately, Maxwell started lacing into me, banging on my desk with his fist and saying how it was outrageous that I had an office that was larger than his. After about forty seconds of this, he said, “Thank you” in a much quieter voice and went out.’

Later, Hoge learned that this had all been staged for the benefit of Maxwell’s youngest child, his 29-year-old daughter, Ghislaine, who had accompanied her father to New York and would shortly be appointed as his ‘Emissary’. As soon as she saw her father’s office, Ghislaine had complained that it wasn’t big enough.

However absurd the incident may have been, it left Hoge turning over a question in his mind: how much of Maxwell’s behaviour was for show and how much was real – and was Maxwell himself able to tell the difference?

Before he left for the day, Maxwell dictated an editorial that would appear in the next morning’s paper. ‘This evening in a dramatic blaze of glory . . .’ he began.

He broke off saying it didn’t strike quite the right note; possibly it might even be considered too self-serving. But anyone who feared that Maxwell’s gift for hyperbole might have deserted him at this crucial hour need not have worried. After a few moments he began again:

‘Today the *Daily News* is back on the streets where it belongs. It is as good as it was before and I promise you it will get better. You may ask why this Brit should want to save New York’s hometown paper. My answer is simple: the *Daily News* is the greatest paper of the greatest city in the world. I want to put it back up there and then keep it there.’

The editorial, signed simply ‘Maxwell’, would appear beneath a headline, ‘Roll ‘Em’, printed in a typeface so large it was only ever normally used to report moon landings and the deaths of presidents. As he walked back through the lobby, Maxwell passed Miss Mackenzie – now looking a lot glummer than she had done before.

That evening, Bob Pirie, Maxwell’s investment banker and

President of Rothschild's Bank in New York, took him out to dinner at Fu's Chinese restaurant on 3rd Avenue, reputedly the best Chinese restaurant in town. It would be an evening Pirie would never forget. 'As we went up First Avenue, people would recognize him and open their car doors and come out and shake his hand,' Pirie recalled.

When they reached Fu's, something extraordinary happened. As soon as he saw Maxwell, the former Mayor of New York, John Lindsay, stood up and started applauding – whereupon the entire restaurant followed suit, the diners clapping away as he was led to his table. 'Maxwell was overwhelmed. I remember him saying, "In my entire life in London, no one's ever acted like this."'

All this flattery had clearly sharpened his appetite. Diners sitting nearby watched agog as course after course was brought to the table, each one dispatched with evident relish. Leaving the restaurant that evening, Maxwell was asked by a reporter waiting outside if he had any celebrations planned.

'I never celebrate,' he told her sternly.

Two days later a party was held on board the *Lady Ghislaine* to mark Maxwell's purchase of the *News*. Various grandees attended, including the Mayor, David Dinkins, and the former Senator for Texas, John Tower, whose hopes of becoming US Secretary for Defense had recently been derailed after accusations of womanizing – it was said that no woman under the age of ninety was safe with him in a lift.

When they arrived, each guest was asked to remove his or her shoes before being shown into the yacht's stateroom. There, they 'feasted on cold salmon, roast beef and Dom Pérignon champagne'. As the *Daily News's* diarist noted, 'It was a very strange sight to see some of New York's most high and mighty standing around in their socks, or in blue bootees that had been specially provided to protect the cream deep-pile carpet.'

Among the invitees was the man Maxwell had just supplanted as the most talked-about businessman in New York: Donald Trump.

Like Maxwell, Trump had been obsessed with buying the *Daily News*. Three years earlier, he'd repeatedly phoned Jim Hoge to ask if it was for sale.

'Donald would never take no for an answer. He never asked whether the paper was making money, or anything like that: he just wanted it. I think about the fifth time he called, I said, Donald, let me put it to you in plain English: it's not for sale. At the time I had no idea why the hell he wanted to buy this struggling tabloid; it was only later that I realized he was looking for a base for his entry into politics.' But since then Trump's fortunes had tumbled and he no longer had enough money to buy – let alone run – a newspaper.

A year earlier, Trump had come to another party on board the *Lady Ghislaine*. Removing his shoes with obvious reluctance, he had handed them to Maxwell's valet, Simon Grigg, before donning his blue bootees. Trump then stood gazing at the yacht's décor – described by one visitor as '1970s Playboy Baroque'. As he did so, Grigg noticed a peculiar expression come over his face: 'It was almost like he was in awe, but didn't want to show it.'

This time, Trump chose not to share in Maxwell's triumph.

Jim Hoge spent much of the evening chatting to Liz Smith, doyenne of New York's gossip columnists. Known as 'The Grand Dame of Dish', and rumoured to be the highest-paid print journalist in America, Smith had left the *Daily News* at the start of the strike to join *Newsweek* magazine. The moment Maxwell saw the two of them talking, he padded over in his monogrammed slippers, hoping to persuade Smith to return to the paper. For some reason he had decided that the best way to woo someone whose career had been spent chronicling the marital squabbles of the rich and famous was by presenting himself as a devoted family man.

'He kept showing me all these pictures of his children and told me that he had been happily married to the same woman for forty-six years,' Smith recalled.

Hoge had also been on the receiving end of some syrupy homilies about the joys of family life. 'Maxwell was always telling us

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what a wonderful marriage he had – and by implication what lousy marriages we all had.’

As they drank their Dom Pérignon and ate their canapés, Hoge and Smith both had the same feeling – a sense that they were witnessing the end of an era. That the boom times were almost over and life would never be quite the same again.

‘I remember Liz looking round and saying wryly, “Well, this may be the last hurrah, but it’s certainly a blast.”’

At the end of the party, after being reunited with their shoes, each guest was presented with a copy of Maxwell’s biography. On the first page was a quote from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: ‘Ambition’s debt is paid.’ It’s a quote generally taken to mean that an unquenchable thirst for power comes at a terrible price.

Less than eight months later, Maxwell’s business empire would have imploded. His reputation would be for ever blackened, his name a byword for corruption and deceit. As for Maxwell himself, he would be dead in circumstances that were even more mysterious than anything in his life.

I.

The Salt Mine

In the early 1920s, the Czechoslovak government, hoping to lure visitors to a remote province in the east of the country called Ruthenia, published a slim pamphlet listing the area's attractions. There wasn't a lot to see, the pamphlet admitted: 'The very best thing here is fresh air.' If you were very lucky, you might spot a wolf, or a wild boar, in the forest.

As for the people, there wasn't much to recommend them either. According to the pamphlet, they were not only unusually thick, but apt to be surly with it: 'The rather unintelligent Ruthenians, whose expression is almost blank-stare, sit in the market-place, side by side, gazing at the distance, seldom speaking a word or moving a muscle.' A far better bet was Ruthenia's large population of Jews, who were generally better-looking, more sophisticated and less grumpy.

In later life, Robert Maxwell seldom talked about his childhood, and what snippets of information he did provide tended to come richly coated in myth. Among the few things not in doubt are his date and place of birth: he was born on 10 June 1923 in a small town in Ruthenia called Solotvino, to a Jewish couple, Mehel and Chanca Hoch, and given – so he believed – the name Jan.

Just as Maxwell would go on to change his name four times by the age of twenty-three, so Solotvino too seemed unsure of its own identity. Originally on the southern edge of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the town became part of Czechoslovakia following the First World War. In the 1930s, it was reclaimed by Hungary before being absorbed into the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War.

It wasn't so much that anyone particularly coveted Solotvino, simply that it stood on the border between two warring superpowers,

right at the geographical centre of Europe. Then, as now, it was a bleak, isolated place, surrounded by thick pine forests and fields of sugar beet. In the winter, it was bitterly cold, in the summer swelteringly hot. The one thing that Solotvino did have was a salt mine. Unlike the rest of the town, this was a remarkable sight. An American visitor in 1938 wrote of standing on a little wooden catwalk watching the miners at work: 'Below us yawned a gulf so profound that workers loading salt blocks looked as small as mice . . . Crystalline walls reflected twinkling lights. Around us, like the roar of a far-off waterfall, rumbled the echoes of pneumatic chisels, cutting this titanic temple vaster still.'

The salt mine was by far the largest employer in the area. But, when Solotvino was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Jews were forbidden to work there. Although this rule was relaxed later, only six Jews ever found jobs in the mine. Even by Solotvino standards, the Hochs were desperately poor. Maxwell's father earned a living, of sorts, buying animal skins from local butchers and selling them on to leather merchants, travelling from town to town with a mule laden with pelts.

At six foot five, he was known as 'Mehel the Tall'. Unlike most of Solotvino's inhabitants, who seem to have been involved in smuggling of one kind or another, Mehel was considered to be doggedly law-abiding. The family lived in a two-room wooden shack with earth floors. In one room, there were a couple of beds, where the family slept. Once a year, as soon as the harvest was gathered in, all the mattress stuffing would be taken outside and burned. Then the mattresses would be restuffed with fresh straw.

The Hochs would eventually have nine children and, as the family grew, newborn babies and toddlers slept in cots suspended on ropes from the ceiling. At night, they must have looked like a flotilla of little boats sailing through the darkness. In the other room, the family cooked, ate and washed – water had to be drawn from a pump down the street. Around the back of the shack was a pit latrine, which would be emptied every few months by passing gypsies and the contents spread on the municipal flowerbeds.

When he was eight days old, Maxwell was circumcised. To celebrate the event, his father decided the family should have a fish supper. Lacking a fishing rod, Mehel tossed a homemade Molotov cocktail into the river. Possibly he overdid the explosive; so many fish were killed in the ensuing blast that half of Solotvino reputedly gorged themselves as a result.

Maxwell was the Hochs' third child, and first-born son. Their oldest daughter had died in infancy, and their oldest surviving son aged two, of diphtheria. From the moment Maxwell was born, his mother doted on him. She fed him titbits from her plate at mealtimes and, when he was six, sold her only pillow to pay for a sleigh to take him to the nearest hospital after he'd been kicked in the head by a horse. As he grew older, she passed on her interest in politics to him – she was an enthusiastic member of the Czechoslovakian Social Democratic Party.

Sometimes Maxwell would claim that he'd never really had a childhood: 'I was never young. I never had that privilege.' But there were three things above all he recalled about life in Solotvino: 'I remember how cold I was, how hungry I was and how much I loved my mother.'

For her part, Chanca Hoch was convinced that her son had been blessed with extraordinary gifts and was destined to make an impact on the world: 'My boy will be famous one day,' she repeatedly told a neighbour. 'I just feel it and know it.' This was such a ludicrous idea that it made even the normally dead-eyed Ruthenians fall about laughing.

If Maxwell adored his mother, he was terrified of his father. Mehel Hoch beat his son on a regular basis – often so hard that he broke his skin. On one occasion the young Maxwell threw up in the street. Grabbing him by the hair, his father rubbed his face in his vomit while passers-by looked on. The fear that his father engendered would never leave him, and nor would the shame he felt at being so frightened.

During the summer, the Hoch children ran around barefoot. In winter, two children would share one pair of shoes. Once a year a goose would be ceremonially slaughtered, but most of the time the family existed on a diet of maize, potatoes and watered-down milk. At home, the Hochs talked Yiddish, but, like most of the Jews in

Solotvino, they also spoke another three languages – Hungarian, Czech and Romanian.

The teenage Maxwell was remembered later as being able ‘to take care of himself’ – and, by implication, anyone foolish enough to cross him – and ‘mischievous’. On the football pitch, he was described simply as ‘aggressive’. Already, it seems, Maxwell was learning to throw his weight around. As he would tell a family friend years later, ‘When in doubt, be brash like myself.’

Naturally left-handed, he was forced to write with his right hand at school as left-handedness was considered to be a sure sign of moral degeneracy. If Maxwell’s writing was – and would always remain – a barely legible scrawl, he was a keen reader with a remarkably retentive memory.

At eleven, his mother sent him to a yeshiva – a Jewish Orthodox free school – where he studied rabbinical literature for a year before moving on to a larger yeshiva in Bratislava. But he seems to have lost his appetite for rabbinical literature pretty quickly and gravitated instead to selling trinkets – mainly bead necklaces.

On 15 March 1939 the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia. The next day Hungary formally annexed Ruthenia. In Bratislava, the fifteen-year-old Maxwell cut off his long sidelocks – payot – to make himself look less Jewish, then caught the train back to Solotvino. His sister Sylvia, six years his junior, recalled meeting him off the train: ‘We could barely recognize you. Instead of the shy yeshiv-abucher [Talmudic scholar] we expected, we saw in front of us a flashy young chap, the pre-war central European equivalent of a teddy boy.’

In Solotvino, the newly flash Maxwell found life suffocatingly dull. Just after his sixteenth birthday in June 1939 he decided to go to Budapest. The only time Maxwell ever talked about leaving his home town was in an interview he gave to *Playboy* magazine that appeared a month before his death: ‘The Hungarians were taking over that part of Czechoslovakia and I said to my parents, “I’m leaving because I want to go and fight.” They didn’t want me to go, but I went anyway.’

He would never see his mother, his father, his grandfather, three of his sisters or his younger brother again.

According to Maxwell's account, he walked the 275 miles to Budapest, sleeping in haystacks and foraging food from hedgerows. Once there, he joined the Hungarian underground helping Czech exiles to escape to the West. In September, Hitler invaded Poland and war was declared.

Three months later, Maxwell was arrested at the Hungarian border and accused of spying – he'd been betrayed by the guide who was meant to be helping the Czechs escape. Brought back to Budapest, he spent the next four months manacled hand and foot in a windowless cell, being interrogated and beaten by the guards with rubber truncheons and bicycle chains. One blow across the face broke his nose.

Still Maxwell refused to talk. A few days later he was told that he'd been sentenced to death. At this point the French embassy took an interest – in the absence of a Czech embassy, the French had assumed responsibility for Czech citizens in Budapest. They protested that as Maxwell was still under eighteen he couldn't be executed without being found guilty of something. Unwilling to provoke a diplomatic incident, the Hungarians hurriedly arranged a trial.

In January 1940, he was loaded into the back of a van and driven off to the courthouse. Nearly fifty years later, Maxwell was a guest on the long-running BBC radio show *Desert Island Discs*. The presenter, Michael Parkinson, introduced him by saying, 'If our castaway needed the money, which he doesn't, he could sell his life story to Hollywood . . . It supports the theory that often truth is more exotic than fiction.'

Parkinson went on to ask Maxwell about being taken off to be tried back in 1940. 'Because I was a youngster, I was only sent to the court with one guard instead of two,' Maxwell told him. 'He had lost an arm in the First World War. I escaped relatively easily and made my way into Yugoslavia.'

He went into more detail when talking to his official biographer, Joe Haines. In this version, Maxwell brought down his manacles on the guard's head, knocking him unconscious, or possibly even killing

him. Jumping out of the moving van, he hid under a bridge, where his handcuffs were removed by a 'gypsy lady'.

Free at last, Maxwell hitched a train ride to Belgrade and met up with another group of young Czechs determined to join the War. From Belgrade, they went overland to Beirut, where they were put up in a Foreign Legion camp before boarding a ship for Marseilles.

Intriguing though this story is, it does beg a number of questions. However stretched the Hungarian prison service may have been at the time, it seems odd that they couldn't rustle up a single two-armed guard to take him to court. In earlier versions of the story, Maxwell didn't say anything about hitting the guard with his manacles – he claimed to have used a stick.

Nor did he say anything about a mysterious gypsy lady. Why hadn't he thought her worth mentioning before? Had she simply slipped his mind? Then there's the question of what was she doing under the bridge in the first place? Did she live there, or just conveniently happen to be passing with a lock-pick? Or could there be another explanation? Had she crept onstage at a later date from some colourful corner of Maxwell's imagination?

Doubts have also been raised about other parts of his story. Two hundred and seventy-five miles is an awfully long way to walk, even for an energetic teenager. His cousin, Alex Pearl, insisted the two of them had gone together by train – with the tickets bought by their respective parents. Pearl remembered how excited they had both been by Budapest: 'We had never seen paved roads, street cars, big houses or anything like it.' The two of them had spent several days together before Maxwell, without warning or explanation, abruptly disappeared.

What does this prove? Only that Maxwell, for all his youthful heroism, had no qualms about embellishing the truth in order to paint himself in a more dashing light. There also seems something apt about such a keen self-mythologizer disappearing into the fog of war. Embracing the opportunities it offered for re-invention. By the time he emerged eighteen months later, he would have changed his religion, his age, his nationality and his name.