

As has been pointed out by many authorities, cultural exchange is the real key to world peace. As Miss Smith here points out, however, the appointment of ambassadors and their staffs on the grounds of their artistic capacities alone will not solve all problems for everybody. . . .

ROBERT E. LEE AT MOSCOW

by Evelyn E. Smith

THE STATELY CORRIDORS OF the American Embassy in Moscow were filled with joyous song, as the Foreign Service officers, singly and in chorus, rehearsed their roles for the next evening's performance. The only one who was actually working at the routine details of his office, rather than practicing scales or painting scenery, was Griffith Herriot Harrington III—or, rather, the youth who passed by that name, for he was an imposter. He sat disconsolately in his office, issuing a visa.

"Thank God, I am finding you, comrade," Said the aged Muscovite lady whose passport was being serviced. "All through embassy am I wandering, looking for some kindly diplomat who will stamping my passport, so I can going to visit my son in United States of America. And everywhere is much singing and no stamping. . . . But

what is with you, little one?"

For a large tear slid slowly down one side of the young diplomat's nose. "Pray do not call me little one, madam," he said—stiffly, to conceal his dismay at this outrageous lapse from self-control. "I am considered to be above the average in height."

Which, indeed, he was, being six feet, four inches tall, and of the approximate width of a stringbean. He would never, his mother had sighed in her frequent futile reviews of his meagre capacities, qualify for government service on beauty alone—like President House, for instance.

Of course she spoke out of prejudice. It was a common Republican allegation that President Charles Lowell House had won, not only the Presidency, but also the popularity on stage and screen that had qualified him for that office, be-

cause of his pulchritude rather than any outstanding dramatic talent. This charge, Democrats had retorted, was absurd, as anyone who had watched President House deliver one of his dramatic monologues before Congress or a television audience could see—unless blindly prejudiced. Which, of course, Mrs. Harrington was and always had been, since her family (she and her husband and cousins) had been Republican from way, way back, even before the time that culture had infiltrated politics, and the common man had fallen by the wayside. . . .

Young Harrington pulled himself out of reverie to find that his client was saying apologetically, "I do not mean to suggesting you are low-sized or even that you are looking extremely young. . . ."

But that's what she thought, he knew, well aware that beneath the bristling moustache, his face was almost flagrantly juvenile. "I am merely employing traditional Russian diminutive," she continued, holding a motherly beam in check, "which, alas, is losing much in translation. But why is it that you are sad, little pigeon? Is it that you grieve because you have no song to sing tomorrow night?"

"I could hardly expect to be given a role in the opera, madam," he said coldly, "as it is obvious that I have no voice."

It might have been better, he had often thought, in his inces-

sant moments of introspection if he had had no voice in literal fact. For the shrill squeak that emerged whenever he opened his mouth made him feel self-conscious—especially in this embassy, where every other officer was a veritable nightingale.

"Ah, well, a voice is not everything," she said reassuringly. "To dancing in the ballet, like the beloved members of our presidium—now that is even more good. Never am I seeing anyone execute a pirouette with more verve, more *iskustro*, more *schmaltz*, than our cultured Marshál Kruzhitnik, may his *entrechats* increase—"

"I do not dance either, madam," the pseudo-Griffith interrupted. If this bothersome old person did not stop persecuting him, he would burst into outright tears. Which, although it might not be considered out of the way for a Russian career officer, would spell disaster for a member of one of the stiff-upper-lip foreign service. French diplomats might relieve their feelings by an occasional sob; Italian diplomats thought nothing of bursting into loud screams; even British diplomats could brush away a silent tear on great or state occasions—but American diplomats didn't cry.

"Then what is your talent, little cultured comrade? . . . Ah," she sighed, as he opened his mouth to equivocate, "to have talent—it is wonderful thing. My family once

had great diplomatic tradition—ministers, ambassadors, saboteurs—not one of the Lgoonskis would have considered entering another profession. We were so cultured, so talented. . . .”

Taking out a large handkerchief of fine linen, embroidered with a coat of arms showing a tractor rampant upon a field vert, she blew her nose.

“What befell them, then?” the young man inquired, glad of the diversion from the original topic.

“My husband and I, alas, are having only one son and he—” she sobbed—“is having no talent, no talent at all. He is not dancing; he is not singing; he is not painting pictures; he is not planning regions; he is not decorating interiors; he—”

“I know,” young Harrington interrupted. “Oh, how well I know!”

“You are not knowing,” the old lady said huffily. “You are too young to have suffered. Besides, you are an American, and everybody is knowing that Americans cannot suffer like Russians can. Nobody can suffer like a Russian can.”

Hal the young man thought ironically. *Little does she know the Dostoyevskian depths my soul is plumbing at this very moment.*

But he said nothing, and, after dabbing at her eyes, the old lady went on brokenly, “So, my son is emigrating to America to become peasant. Is better to be peasant in

America, where, at least, it is not required to be wearing embroidered blouses.”

“There are worse things than being a peasant,” young Harrington sighed, his voice breaking also. His family too had had a long diplomatic tradition—which had been besmirched once and was in a fair way to be broken now. If only an embroidered blouse would solve the problem, how glad he would be to don one. *The land, he thought, now there's an idea. Working with the soil—making green things grow—now isn't that creative?* Perhaps that is my aptitude. That afternoon he would go out and buy a flowerpot and some seeds. . . .

“And your talent, young sir?” the old pest asked. After he had almost begun to think she had side-tracked herself. Still, it was a legitimate question, for every diplomat had to have some talent, and, for the higher echelons and more important embassies, genius. Mere competence got you nowhere in these enlightened days.

“I am—” he choked on the lie—“a poet.”

“Ah, a poet.” She nodded approvingly. “Poetry is good, too. Very cultural. Pushkin wrote poetry. So did Lermontov. So did—”

“Yes,” he broke in, “and very fine poetry, too.”

Though, to tell the truth, he had barely heard of either. It was not that he was poetically xenophobic;

it was that he wasn't a poet at all. He was a fraud. He was nothing. How it had hurt to have to turn aside all requests for collaboration on the libretto with the excuse that he was not a songwriter! And, when he'd been asked to write a dedicatory poem entitled "Three Cheers for the Blue and the Gray," to be read before the overture, he had replied curtly that he was a poet, not a writer of occasional verse.

True, that was precisely what the real Griffith Herriot Harrington III would have said, for he was rude to everyone except his mother, but Oliver—for that was this youth's name—did not have even enough of the creative talent to carry off discourtesy. Effective rudeness was an integral part of real artistry, and he was not an artist in any sense of the word.

From that time on, he had been distinctly *persona non grata* at the embassy. No one ever spoke to him, except to ask where he had put the extra passports. Ambassador Rainey, after staring at him coldly, had been heard to remark, "Oh, if only politics could be kept out of diplomacy, we would not be saddled with such nincompoops!" After which Oliver had been given all the really nasty tasks that no one else at the embassy wanted to do—issuing visas, scrubbing floors, and welcoming itinerant congressional committees.

For some time after the Rus-

sian lady had left, showering non-denominational blessings upon him, Oliver sat brooding at his desk, trying not to hear the powerful basso of Ambassador Rainey, as it reverberated through the air-conditioning ducts of the embassy with the pulse-stirring "At the Battle of Antietam, the Yanks we almost beat 'em . . ." The air-conditioning system conducted and amplified sound so vigorously as to give substance to the rumor that it incorporated a spy system that had somehow gone wrong.

The season before, the entire presidium of the USSR had performed the classical American Ballet *Rodeo*, as a tribute to the United States. However, in order not to offend the neutral nations, the Russian officials had substituted Cossacks for cowpunchers, and the heroine—performed with considerable dash by Mme. Bistranoganoff, secretary of the Communist Party (and the celebrity after which sausage à la Bistranoganoff had, of course, received its name)—a land girl. The result had been a smash success. Those Bolsheviks, the Americans had had to admit, really knew how to shake a leg.

Not to be outdone, the American Embassy to Moscow was presenting an equally parochial version of *Boris Godunoff*, with the locale changed to America, the time to the Civil War, and the title to *Lee at Appomatox*. The

music was also syncopated slightly to give it that distinctive American flavor. It was expected to be the diplomatic sensation of the season . . . and Oliver Hamilton Harrington had no part in it. He had failed his country.

Not that his country was materially damaged by his nonparticipation. On the contrary, he could have contributed nothing to the opera but disaster. However, he felt guilty nonetheless, for Oliver Hamilton Harrington had never been destined for the diplomatic services, and it was only fate, in the person of his mother—who had always resembled one of the more implacable Greek goddesses—that had placed him there.

If it hadn't been for Griffith Herriot Harrington II, his father, all this need never have happened. Griffith Herriot Harrington II had been a poet of such eminence that he had quickly risen in the diplomatic service, having been appointed ambassador to Rome before he was thirty. At Rome, he had acquitted himself with distinction for several years—until he had overreached himself by reading aloud, at a *conversazione* arranged by the Italian cabinet in honor of the officials of the United States Embassy, a set of original Latin verses. The Italian foreign minister, himself a historical preserver and classical scholar of considerable ability, had politely pointed out six false quantities.

Two choices were open to Griffith Herriot Harrington II. He could go back to the United States in disgrace, or he could take the honorable way out. He chose the latter, and his ashes were shipped back to the United States in a handsome Etruscan urn—the gift of the Italian government. Accompanying the urn were his pregnant widow and his little son, Griffith Herriot Harrington III, who was just turned ten.

For the next decade and a half, the boy and his posthumously-born brother, Oliver Hamilton Harrington, lived with their mother on the outskirts of Washington, existing in genteel poverty on the small pension granted her by the government, eked out by canapes from the larger diplomatic receptions—for Mrs. Harrington no longer was asked to the really exclusive affairs.

From earliest youth, young Griffith had shown great promise as a poet, and an equally great disinclination for the diplomatic service. "But consider this, Griffith," his mother had kept telling him ever since little Oliver could remember, and he had total recall, "what other career is open to the creative artist than the government? What else can he expect to do? What publishing firm would put out the works of a poet who held no civil-service rank—except, perhaps in a soft-cover edition?"

"In the old days—"

"In the old days, poets starved!" Mrs. Harrington had snapped. "Think of your family, Griffith," she had urged in softer tones. "The Harringtons have always been poets, always diplomats."

"Great-great-great grandfather Harrington was Ambassador to Togoland," Griffith had pointed out, "and he could neither read nor write, let alone be a poet. He had to put his x on passports."

"He had the soul of a poet," Mrs. Harrington had snarled. "Besides, he occupied that post in your vaunted old days. You should thank your stars that you are living in the new ones, when a culturally-oriented government appreciates talent and subsidizes genius. To think that, in the past, practicing artists had to struggle along as free-lances, or even teachers, many suffering in the process. One shudders to think of it."

But Griffith Herriot Harrington III had refused to shudder. "Suffering purifies and ennobles, Mama," he had replied, being romantic, as befitted a poet. He was also stubborn, and he refused to be psychoanalyzed, although it should have been as obvious to him as everyone else that his hatred of government service stemmed from his subconscious, and was very likely the result of some unhappy childhood experience.

For Mrs. Harrington was fundamentally right, of course, ill-chosen

though her words had been. Now that culture had come into its own, entering government service was the be-all, and end-all of the intelligentsia's desires, instead of being considered, as it had been during the twentieth century, rather unchic, if not downright vulgar.

It was the passage of the International Cultural Exchange and Trade Fair Participation Act of 1956 that had, not overnight but gradually, plunged the world into a Re-renaissance—only more so—with the difference that the part played by such noble families as the Medicis and the Borgias was now very adequately filled by the governments of the various countries. The "permissive" features of the bill had resulted in such a vast expansion of the original program as to cause a drastic change in political and social criteria as a whole. No longer were administrative ability, self-assurance, and powerful friends enough to get a man (or woman) into high office. He needed to have some talent of a creative nature besides—or, at least, powerful relatives—to qualify him for the post.

Major talents—artists, sculptors, symphonic composers, and such—generally still looked to the diplomatic service, where they had first received the recognition they had always known should be their due, or the highest federal positions. Those with lesser talents—tap dancers, jugglers, comedians—

became junior senators, members of the House of Representatives, or assemblymen. Tea tasters, flutists, flower arrangers, and those of that ilk found places befitting their talents as county sheriffs, aldermen, and park commissioners. All the rest—that vast majority who could not make the cultural grade—took their place in that huge array of citizens whose humble endeavors kept the mighty drum of the republic beating—doctors, butchers, bankers, garbage men, attorneys, chocolate dippers, teachers, and so on . . . those squalid unsung heroes without whom society could not conveniently exist.

And it was a teacher that young, idealistic Griffith, to his mother's consternation, had decided to become, for the cultural unions no longer permitted the free-lance artistry he would otherwise have chosen. Upon finishing college, he applied for a fellowship at Harvard, which for some time persisted in regarding him as another poet of the same name; it was simply unable to believe that it had been lucky enough to bag the genuine article. For the cognoscenti (with whom Harvard, as it had been from time immemorial, was full) knew that young Griffith was a fine poet, even greater, perhaps, than his father.

Matters might have rested there and the fine old house of Harrington faded into obscurity, had not the news of young Harrington's

fate come to the ears of the president. It happened to be an election year, and he wished to make a cultural yet noncommittal gesture toward the opposition. So, not understanding that the young man's failure to enter the diplomatic service derived from lack of volition rather than lack of genius—rather, *refusing* to understand, for the Secretary of Verse surely must have told him—he appointed Griffith a clerk at the American Embassy in Moscow. There, since the specialty for the last few decades had been music, any poetic shortcomings on the boy's part ought not to be obvious.

"Griffith," Mrs. Harrington had declared, on taking the message from the robopigeon, for she monitored all communication within the household—"you must accept the post. No matter how base the motives that prompted the offer, you must redeem the family honor."

There was no way for Griffith to refuse. One didn't do that sort of thing. Had he tried, even his colleagues at Harvard would have thought him mad, and, although a mild degree of insanity did not disqualify a man from teaching, it certainly stood in the way of his getting a full professorship. Once he became a professor, of course, it would be another matter. Tradition would then classify whatever might be called insanity in an instructor as mere eccentricity on the part of a professor.

Most important, Griffith, for all his outspokenness, was afraid of his mother. And she stood over him, dictating his letter of acceptance, kindly spelling out the words with which she thought he might have difficulty.

His rocket passage was all booked, his frock coat and fur cap were all packed when, at the last moment, Griffith locked himself into his room and called through the door that he was not going to come out until he had finished an epic poem with which a muse had just seized him. This would, he warned his mother, take at least three years to complete, so they need not expect him in Moscow until then. If they were in a hurry, he added, they'd better get someone else.

"Oliver," Mrs. Harrington had said, tears tempering the chilled steel of her eyes, "we are lost. Unless—" and then she looked at her younger son with dawning hope—"I have it! *You* will save us!"

And she embraced him, which she did not often do, for he was the ugly ducking of the family, being utterly devoid of talent. It had been planned to apprentice him to some respectable craft when he was older—probably the law, as the family could throw considerable business his way. The Harringtons were always suing somebody.

"But how can I, Mama?" Oliver had piped sadly. "What can I do? As you have so often said to me, I

am quite stupid and utterly without personal charm—"

"Be still," Mrs. Harrington had commanded. "You will take Griffith's place!"

"Me, Mama!" Oliver had squeaked. "But I could not write a line of verse to save my life. Besides, I am only fourteen."

"No matter, you are tall for your age. And, if you grow a moustache—"

"But, Mama, I—"

"—or paste on a moustache," she went on impatiently, "you will look older, and very like the photographs of Griffith, if he had a moustache."

"But, Mama, suppose they ask me to write a poem!"

"A great poet like Griffith cannot be expected to write verse at the drop of a gibus. You must make do!"

"But, Mama—"

"You will do as I tell you, Oliver!" she had said firmly. "It is our only chance. If you are found out, it does not much matter as Griffith's predicament could not be worse. And *your* reputation does not count."

"Yes, Mama," he had given in meekly.

And so, little (chronologically speaking) Oliver Hamilton Harrington, equipped with his brother's cunningly matched luggage his thesaurus and his rhyming dictionary (to add verisimilitude to the imposture), and a burden of

guilt too great for his tender years had set out alone on his mission to Moscow. There, for nearly a year, he had served the United States Foreign Service with uncommon inadequacy. That was, of course, as regarded his primary or cultural duties. As for routine matters, he did well enough. Having an ear, he soon learned to speak Russian perfectly. He had patience and a flair for detail, and he got on extremely well with the natives, even those to whom he was forced to refuse visas—but of what value were such pedestrian accomplishments, he told himself mournfully, to a diplomat!

Now, opening the door to his office, he saw no more applicants for visas waiting in the corridor. Since, that very morning, he had polished the floors to a stellar brilliancy, his day's work was done. For the others—the creative, the accepted ones—rehearsals would extend far into the night.

"... Sharpsburg they took her," Ambassador Rainey's powerful voice bellowed through the halls, as Oliver trudged upstairs, feeling unworthy of the lift, "whilst we stood off Hooker. . . ." Properly speaking, "The Battle of Antietam" (as suggested by "The Siege of Katan") belonged to the role of Stonewall Jackson (Varlaam), but the ambassador had taken a fancy to it, and there was nothing Stonewall, the First Secretary, could do but grind his teeth

and plan long letters to the *Times* in his dreams.

Upstairs, in his little garret, Oliver removed his moustache and peered anxiously into the watery depths of the mirror that hung over the lop-sided dressing table. No, the prickling beneath had been neither imagination nor nerves—a slight full, which would have been almost imperceptible to the eye of one to whom that patch of skin was not dear and familiar—darkened his upper lip. Soon, at least, his moustache would be real, even if everything else about him was false, false, false! Soon he would be a man in body as well as responsibility.

But of what avail was that, when he could not be his own man? What, he wondered, suddenly able to give mature consideration to the subject, did his mother mean for him to do: pose as Griffith for another three years, until the epic (if any, he thought with new-born adult cynicism) was finished? Or would he have to go on living a lie for the rest of his unnatural life? Oliver pressed his throbbing forehead against the cold greenish glass of the window and looked out at the falling snow and wished he were dead.

The ambassador's voice rose through the air-conditioning ducts, loud, strong, inescapable: "Leaning against a porch pillar, McClellan sipped his sarspa—"

And broke off in a loud squawk.

Probably the ambassador had received an urgent dispatch or seen a mouse, Oliver thought dully. There was always so much going on in the embassy. . . .

Downstairs, he heard the pounding of many feet, the babble of excited voices, and several short screams. *Perhaps it is another revolution*, he thought, *but we are on American soil; it will not affect us, except perhaps to postpone an opera opening until a new government has been established.*

It was only when he took his place at dinner, not only below the salt but underneath it—for the large size of the embassy staff had necessitated two-tier dining arrangements—that he discovered the trouble was something far more cataclysmic than a mere foreign revolution. In the middle of practicing "The Battle of Antietam," Ambassador Rainey had been stricken by laryngitis. He had lost his voice.

He had no understudy, for there was no basso in the embassy capable of sustaining the difficult role of General Robert E. Lee. The officers playing Meade (Lovitzki) and Sheridan (Tcherniakovski) were good bassos, but not great. As for the First Secretary, he was more the nephew of a previous president than a really good singer—although not incompetent; even the spoils system would not tolerate a Foreign Service officer totally without accomplishment.

In fact, there was no other basso in the United States deemed capable of handling the role on an international level, save Clyde Wappinger, Governor of the State of New York. Of course, Wappinger could hardly be familiar with the new libretto and would probably have to sing Boris's words to Robert E. Lee's costume. However, since his Russian was so poor and his enunciation imperfect in any language, Moscow would never know the difference. A robot-pigeon was dispatched with a message asking him to rocket over forthwith to save the situation and the embassy, if not the ambassador.

It was then that the hardest blow fell. Wappinger's answer was no! The opening night of the American Embassy in Moscow coincided with the opening night of the Metropolitan Opera in New York. And Governor Wappinger was scheduled to open the season as *Don Giovanni*, with all new costumes. "I am sorry," his message to the embassy read, "I love my country but my state comes first."

If my country had thought anything of me, anyone could read between the lines, *it would not have elected Charles Lowell House president at the last election.* For Governor Wappinger had been the unsuccessful Republican candidate, ascribing his loss to the fact that he did not photograph

well. Which was, indeed, the fact. He did not photograph well because he had an ugly face. He was also not a sportsman, as was amply evident now.

Curiously enough, the general air of wretchedness that pervaded the embassy that evening lifted Oliver's spirits. With the entire embassy facing ruin, even the discovery of his imposture, he thought almost gaily, would evoke, at most, a hollow groan. Soon to be scorned themselves, the officers of the embassy could hardly point the finger of scorn at him. He was so overcome with gladness, he had to take care to hide his feelings from his confreres. Although there had not been a lynching on American soil for over a century, a historical revival was not an impossibility.

It was decided to wait until morning before announcing the cancellation of the opera. Perhaps, in the interim, the ambassador might recover his voice. But the next morning, as Oliver sprang from his narrow cot, the air-conditioning ducts were silent, save for the sound of broken sobbing throughout the embassy.

Never had Oliver felt so sprightly, and, as he examined his budding moustache—three more hairs seemed to have sprouted all overnight—he felt impelled to burst into song. It was the first time such a desire had seized him since he came to Moscow, although he had been a notable bathtub per-

former at home. "My men stood firm and would not turn aside," he carolled, for "The Battle of Antietam" could not help but impress itself upon his young mind, so often had he heard it. "Thus we gave pause to General Burnside. . . ."

And he stopped as short as Ambassador Rainey had, the evening before, though the reason for his halt was diametrically opposite. Ambassador Rainey had lost a voice; Oliver Hamilton Harrington had found one. For the sound that rose up from his narrow chest and burst forth from his swelling throat was no longer the piping soprano that had afflicted him so grievously. It was a full-throated, resonant basso that filled every corner of the tiny apartment with its golden tones, and, borne on the wings of the air-conditioning system soared throughout the embassy where, one by one, the sorrowing officers of the United States Foreign Service lifted their heads first in incredulity and then in hope.

"Today," Oliver whispered, staring into the mirror where, by some trick of the light, his moustache seemed to have assumed almost luxuriant proportions, "not yesterday but today—my voice has changed—today I am a man."

The rest, of course, is history. How Oliver Hamilton Harrington, thoroughly familiar with the role of Robert E. Lee, because of the

Ambassador's overzealous practicing (which may, indeed, have led to the loss of his voice) went on that night as the lead in *Lee at Appomatox* and scored a greater success than any mere Boris had ever enjoyed. How the entire presidium of the USSR had kissed him on both cheeks and awarded him the order of the Sova-Seepoocha, the Order of the Koshatchya Moozika, and the Order of the Kreek, in rapid succession.

How, after Ambassador Rainey's resignation, Oliver Hamilton Harrington, *in propria persona*, was appointed the new ambassador to Moscow—the first United States Ambassador to any major country who had not yet attained the age of sixteen. How his hitherto sneered at idiosyncracies became all the diplomatic vogue and his endearing little habit of trying to make friends with the natives was copied in United States embassies all over the world, thus setting a totally new fashion in American diplomacy. How Griffith had been released from his fears and his room and, in grateful acknowledgement, finished his epic (which, having been originally an

excuse, had become an actuality; he had become bored and started writing it) as the libretto to the opera *Harrington at Moscow*, with which his brother opened the next season, to loud acclaim. The work immediately became part of the standard repertory in all the leading opera houses, eventually outranking both *Boris Godunoff* and *Lee at Appomatox* in popularity.

"I always knew Oliver had it in him," Mrs. Harrington was heard to declare later. "I just knew it was a question of waiting for his talent to blossom forth."

Although he knew she lied in her dentures, Oliver forgave her for all her ill-treatment of him, because she was his mother; and, whenever he had anything left over from his ambassadorial salary, he would send her a little something to add to her pension. That wasn't often, however, for, as everyone knows, an American ambassador's salary is inadequate to support him unless he has considerable personal resource, and the only personal resources Oliver had were his golden voice and his golden heart, neither of which paid for the champagne.

