

Jean Trumington

Coming Up Trumps

A MEMOIR

MACMILLAN



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Foreword and Acknowledgements

A few months ago, I was doing my weekly shop in Waitrose, and a rather beautiful, rather elegant, little white-haired lady kept bumping into me, and I kept bumping into her. Eventually, I said, 'Look here, my name is Baroness Trumpington, and I am blind and I can't see you and I was at Bletchley.' The little white-haired lady, who was wearing a pink trouser suit and a string of pearls, said, 'I am Princess Radziwill and I worked at Baker Street.' 'Lor!' I said. 'That's very posh.' I knew exactly what Baker Street was: that was the Secret Operations Executive, where all the 007s were briefed before they were sent off to France during the war. 'I'm eighty-nine,' said the Princess. 'I'm ninety,' said I. And we two ancient ladies, who had never met before, congratulated each other on our war effort, and on the coincidence of our meeting in Waitrose in Knightsbridge, and on our still being alive.

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I was thrilled, and charmed. But the truth is, this kind of thing happens to me all the time. I have had the most extraordinary life, full of kindness, and incredible good luck, and naughtiness and jolly good fun.

I have met David Lloyd George, Max Beaverbrook, Jackie Kennedy, Bette Davis, Senator McCarthy, Stanley Spencer. Come to think of it, I have in fact met every single post-war prime minister, from Clement Attlee (who I met at the theatre) to David Cameron, and practically every world leader from Her Majesty the Queen to the Assads, Fidel Castro and Robert Mugabe. I was in Manhattan in the fifties, at Cliveden in the sixties, and on Concorde's first and last flights. I seem to have stumbled into fascinating events without really trying, and to have met formidable and extraordinarily interesting people, despite being rather dull myself.

That's one piece of luck. I have also been lucky in my family life. Without a doubt the happiest years of my life were the years I lived with my husband Alan, always known as Barker, and our son Adam at The Leys School in Cambridge. I don't think anybody could have been happier.

I also feel enormously lucky to have had such terribly interesting jobs, despite having never taken an exam in my life – not even a driving test. (I learnt to drive during the war, when we were all given licences without having

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to take a test.) It started with Bletchley, and my post-war job in Paris, which were both marvellous in their own way. Many years later it was largely through luck that I became a councillor in Cambridge.

My final piece of luck has been finding a second life, and a second family, in the House of Lords. I adored being a minister and learning about this country. I feel honoured to be part of the very special, kind and fun-loving institution that is the House of Lords.

Some would say that people make their own luck. I don't agree. I believe more in fate. Some say that fortune favours the well-prepared. Well, I certainly wasn't well-prepared. There has been no design to my life at all: no plot, no plan. I've lived by the skin of my teeth and taking chances at village dances.

In some ways though, I suppose I have made a small contribution to my good luck.

I have been brave: going to Paris at fifteen, Bletchley at eighteen and New York at twenty-nine, each time on my own and knowing no one; learning to ski, and water ski and goodness knows what else, just to impress a man I was keen on; daring to mix with very grand people on a shoestring; and being prepared to ask for things that others wouldn't have dreamed of mentioning. I was often frightened, but I did it anyway. It is surprising how far that approach has taken me over the years.

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I seem to have made people laugh too, from a society doctor in New York, to members of the House of Lords. If you do things with no humour, you lose. If you can be funny and charming, you can get away with all kinds of things – sometimes without even meaning to. If you can make people laugh, you can probably make them like you, and sometimes you can even make them listen to you.

And I have worked hard: I have done what I have been asked to do and tried my best to do it well. The phrase I have always wanted to avoid above all others is, ‘she’s not up to the job.’

Above all, I have always tried to make the effort to make friends, and to find the fun in whatever situation I find myself in. That has got me into trouble at times, but it has also served me well.

I have had a lucky life, and I think I am still lucky now. I have had to give up some of the things that give me the most pleasure: smoking cigarettes; needlepoint and reading more recently when my eyes went; and dancing on tables now that I like to be in bed by ten. And I have been quite ill, which has taken away the great pleasure of eating. But even being ill has its upside, with all kinds of people, including lords from both sides of the House, showing me great warmth and kindness. And despite all of this, I am still having tremendous fun. I still get great

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pleasure from rattling around antique shops for bargains, and playing bridge with my old friends and going to the races. I rather enjoy my chocolate milkshake medicine. And secretly I am still hoping for one last stately little tap-dance in top hat and tails up on a table.

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I want to use this opportunity to say thank you to some people who are very important to me. My years as Barker's wife were the happiest of my life and I am eternally grateful to him for giving me the love and affection I had craved since childhood.

The person to whom I owe the most in my professional life is the late Baroness Thatcher. It was Mrs Thatcher who put me in the Lords, and gave me my jobs. I will always be grateful for that.

I want to thank the many people in my life who continue to show me kindness: my hairdresser Bobby, my two lovely ladies who help me every week at Waitrose, my cleaner Lucy, the taxi drivers from Atlas who take me absolutely everywhere I need to go, my upstairs neighbours the Plaistows, and my great friends without whom I would be pushing up the daisies, the ever-helpful caretaker Garnet, assistant caretaker Val and plumber Len at my block of flats; at the House of Lords, I want to particularly thank the attendants to the chamber, the very helpful

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people who work at the post office in Central Lobby and in the finance office, the chefs and the wonderful Mary Rose in the dining room, and, of course, Black Rod. These people are near and dear to me: they make my life better every day through the kindness they show me. I want to acknowledge my huge debt of gratitude to every one of them.

Several people have been kind to me in helping me to write this book, principally Georgina Morley at Pan Macmillan and Deborah Crewe. It was Georgina who first suggested I should write a memoir. My first instinct was to ask, 'Could any sense ever be made of me?' followed by, 'And why on earth would anyone be interested in my doings?' However the redoubtable Ms Morley assured me all would be well on both fronts and then – wonderfully – produced Deborah Crewe who did her utmost to prove Georgina right – and as if that wasn't enough brought homemade soup with her on every visit to Battersea, which kept me going over a difficult summer. If you ever need a silk purse making out of a sow's ear I suggest you ask Georgina and Deborah.

Finally, I want to thank Adam. I imagine I am a most irritating mother, but he is the most wonderful son. He has always had guts and get-up-and-go and independence and courage, and I admire him enormously for it. He has shown great character in becoming what he has become.

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I am very touched by the trouble he takes over me now, and full of love and gratitude towards him. My love and gratitude are also due to my daughter-in-law Elizabeth and my grandchildren Virginia and Christopher. I hope that this book will always remind them of me, and of the love that I have for them all.

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I hope that this book is not boring. I couldn't bear that. I hope too that it isn't too rude. I do like to say what I think: I think it is terribly important to remain true to yourself. But the last thing I want is to upset anyone. I like a fight – especially a fight for something I believe in – but underneath it all, I am perhaps not quite as tough as I must sometimes seem.

CHAPTER ONE

A Glamorous Childhood

Childhood was not my happiest time. But when the war came and I was sent to Bletchley Park I grew up. Quite frankly, I've been happy ever since.

I never told anyone I was unhappy. One didn't. I had two younger brothers but I wouldn't have dreamed of confiding in them. Instead I became very self-contained about my feelings. My mother worked it out on the day she turned up at my boarding school unannounced and was greeted by the headmistress with more than the expected degree of surprise. Two weeks previously I had told everyone that my mother had died.

It wasn't my parents' fault. They were born in the nineteenth century and brought up by Victorians.

In fact my father, Arthur Campbell-Harris, hadn't really been brought up by his parents at all – he had barely known them. My grandfather was Surgeon General in India, and when my father was still a young boy he had

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been sent 'home' to live with relations and go to school in England (which he hated).

My mother, Doris Robson, was brought up as a sort of American princess: very very rich and rather spoilt. She never had to do anything for herself. Her father had come over to England from the United States in the 1880s and made an awful lot of money in the paint business and she was the heiress.

She and my father brought me up much as they had been brought up: it was simply how one did it then.

Young children led a nursery life, with mother and father sweeping in to say goodnight, all dressed up to go out for the evening with their friends in the Prince of Wales' set. Later, you were packed off to school. I didn't see much of them, and I found them rather frightening. There were no demonstrations of love and certainly no hugs.

My grandparents weren't demonstrative either – and not much use for confiding in. My father's mother came back from India after she was widowed and she terrified me. Once, as a teenager, I started to wear nail varnish to stop me biting my nails. My grandmother thought this was dreadful and called me 'a little nautch girl'. It's an Indian word. A nautch girl was a dancing girl, but she meant I looked like a tart probably. All I really remember about my mother's parents is my grandmother being deeply

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hurt and upset because my grandfather, whom she adored, was being horrible to her. Looking back I am sure he had Alzheimer's, which can make one terribly cruel to one's loved ones, but we didn't know about those things then.

I had nannies, of course. Nannies were often far more affectionate than one's relations. My first, lovely Nurse Toy, was a real old-fashioned nanny – she gave us lots of hugs – and I adored her. I can't truly remember much about her – I wish I could – except that I know, without a doubt, that I loved her and she loved me. But we were her last babies, and then she retired to Aldershot and that was that. The rest were just girls, really, who were horrid to me. They liked the boys and they couldn't be bothered with me.

My birth – on 23 October 1922 – was announced in *The Times*, of course. One of the other personal announcements that day was the thrilling news that Mr and Mrs Baron had changed their telephone number. Extraordinary, to think one put one's telephone number in the personal column of *The Times*. My parents knew the Barons, they made a fortune in cigarettes.

We lived in quite a large house when I was born. I only have one memory of it: having to be very very quiet because my brother David was being born.

My mother was in love with David, she really was. Me, she didn't much care for and the same was sadly true

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of Alastair, too, who came thirteen months after David. But David she adored and she treated him differently from everybody else. She called him Dimples. I longed for a nickname but she only ever called me Jean.

Soon after David was born we moved to a bigger house, 55 Great Cumberland Place, near Marble Arch. The whole of W1 was very much the smart part of London in those days, north of Hyde Park – Grosvenor Square and all those places. Everyone wanted to live there. Kensington and Chelsea were not posh at all then. Kensington was very much cheap flats for the respectable retired. A flat in Kensington was where you put grannies – particularly grannies who had been in India, because they had nowhere else to live, and no money. Genteel, but not smart. As for places like Battersea, I hadn't even heard of them and certainly didn't go there.

Great Cumberland Place was a Georgian townhouse: narrow and tall, with black railings and a white painted front. The kitchen was in the basement. On the ground floor was the hall, the dining room and my father's study. Up a half-landing was the drawing room and then up another half-landing was my mother's bedroom and my father's dressing room. The nursery area, where we children lived, was on the top floor. I remember leaning out of the top floor window with a penny wrapped in paper and throwing it down for the muffin man. At night,

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I would watch the man who came to light the street lamps.

We ate all our meals in the day nursery although it was an awfully long way from the kitchen. There was a little lift to send the plates up and down but even so I think we were pretty unpopular with the kitchen.

We had a very good cook, mind you. And apart from her and nanny, there was a parlour maid, an under-parlour maid, about three cleaners, a governess, an under-nanny and a chauffeur. We didn't have a butler though. I don't know why and nor, to tell you the truth, do I know where they all slept – except the chauffeur: he had a cottage in the mews at the back. He was treated as a sort of head groom, really, which is probably what he had been before he became a chauffeur.

We were very handy for Hyde Park and Nanny often took us there for walks. My dearest companion at that time was my little black Scottie dog. He was such a dear little dog, and very good-tempered, putting up with the loving attentions of three little children. (And now that I think about it I have no idea how he managed, living with us on the top floor. What happened when he needed to go out to pee?) But one day the boys and Nanny were walking with him and he was stolen: he disappeared. They went off to Hyde Park together and came back without him. I was convinced that it wouldn't have happened if

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I'd been there, and was absolutely heartbroken. Once we were walking in the park and I saw an airship flying overhead, the doomed R101. It was tremendously exciting. There were only two of them – the R100 and the R101 – so it was a very rare sight. They were terribly comfortable to be in, I think, but they were doomed. In 1930, when I was about eight, the R101 crashed over France and nearly everybody in it was killed.

Years later, during the war, number 55 was the only house in Great Cumberland Place to be bombed. We had left by that time, but of course I had to go back to have a look. The whole of the front of the house had been blown off and I could see my nursery wallpaper from the street. It must have been a really clean bomb though, because every other house had been left standing.

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My parents moved in all the right circles, so it was, I suppose, a glamorous life. But of course as a child you don't know your life is different from anyone else's.

My grandmother was great friends with the Lloyd George family, and my mother was great friends with one of his daughters, Lady Carey-Evans, so we and the Lloyd George grandchildren on that side were all sort of brought up together. One of the granddaughters, Margie Carey-

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Evans, was a bridesmaid at my parents' wedding. And later on, Robin Carey-Evans was a very close friend.

One of my mother's greatest friends was Lady Reading, who became my godmother. Her husband, Lord Reading, had been a member of Asquith's cabinet – the first practising Jew to be a member of the British government – and then Viceroy of India. My father had been his aide-de-camp, which was how he and my mother first met. Sadly, Alice Reading was an invalid all her life, but she still threw herself into charitable work, working with women and children and setting up hospitals in India. When they came back to London, the Readings lived in Curzon Street and we used to go there for tea. Lord Reading used to put balls of butter on the end of his very large nose, to make us laugh. We used to call the former viceroy our butter-nosed uncle.

After Alice Reading died, Lord Reading married Stella Charnaud, who had been his secretary in Delhi. Stella Reading was a tremendously energetic and active person. She founded the Women's Voluntary Service in the lead-up to the Second World War and in 1958 was appointed a life peer in her own right, becoming the first woman to take up her seat in the House of Lords. Baroness Swanborough, as she then became, took a great interest in all the staff working at the House of Lords and took enormous trouble to make sure they had proper facilities:

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lavatories, places to wash their hands and so on. That is a great legacy for her because previously their lordships had really not taken any interest. I only knew her when I was a child – and in fact my main memory of her is that she had a heated loo seat at her house in Great North Street. But I think of her often.

There were other political friends, too. The Thorpes, for example. John Thorpe was a Conservative MP and his wife, Ursula – rather oddly, it seemed to me – always wore a monocle. Their son, Jeremy, who was a few years younger than me, would later become leader of the Liberal Party, although his career ended in scandal. As a child I spent quite a lot of time with Jeremy, although I actually thought he was rather a horrid little boy and we used to have terrible fights.

My parents were marvellous hosts and my mother, especially, always made sure everything was just so. I remember that one day there was a great fuss because the Maharani of Kapurthala was coming to lunch and my mother was serving rice and she wanted it to be properly cooked. The maharani had been a friend of my mother's since they were at finishing school together in Paris. Her name was now Maharani Prem Kaur but at that time she had been Anita Delgado, the beautiful and rather fast Spanish flamenco dancer, who had been spotted by the maharaja at the wedding of King Alfonso XIII of Spain.

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The maharaja had decided he had to marry her, and had brought her to Paris to be wooed and educated.

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While my mother enjoyed smart London lunches and cocktail parties, my brothers and I were in the nursery – or at school.

I was sent to endless posh schools. First, Miss Faunce's day school in Queen's Gardens, Bayswater, where there were two mistresses called Miss Cooke and Miss Kitchen, which was a big joke for us girls. Next, Miss Spalding's in Queen's Gate. By this time my brothers were going to school too, at Wagners, the boys' pre-prep school in Queen's Gate, and we used to fight all the way there on the top deck of the bus. I rather suspect my mother didn't pay the bills. I can't think why else I kept moving schools.

I also attended Miss Vacani's School of Dancing, where I learnt ballroom dancing and the correct way to curtsy when presented at court. Lessons took place in a big room on the first floor of a house in Knightsbridge, with all the nannies sitting upright and silent in chairs arranged around the edge of the room. Miss Vacani, who also gave private lessons to the young princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose, was not at all glamorous-looking. She was a tubby little person who wore the most impossibly high heels. Once a year she organized a charity matinee at the

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Hippodrome Theatre and we all performed in front of our parents and nannies. There is a photo somewhere of me aged seven dressed as a Russian girl, and my brother David – who as a young gentleman was also expected to learn to dance – in a mauve suit. I danced the Tarantella that year and he had to dance as though in a nightclub. He didn't like the mauve suit at all.

Incredibly, after a year or two of Miss Vacani, my mother removed me and sent me to learn ballet with the Ballet Rambert, a serious ballet school whose prize ballerina was the famously beautiful Pearl Argyle. Goodness knows why my mother decided that this elephant she had given birth to was going to become a graceful ballet dancer but it did at least teach me rhythm.

Apart from school and dance lessons, Nanny took me skating at Grosvenor House once a week, which I loved; and my hair was done at Antoine's on Bond Street, which I didn't. My mother used to send me there on my own, early in the morning, because before nine o'clock it was half price. And I was made to have a perm, which I hated because in those days perms were ghastly, they just made your hair fuzzy. I was terribly shy and it made me feel sick inside being at the hairdressers just with grown-ups and all alone.

But then in 1929 came the Wall Street Crash. We lost everything. 55 Great Cumberland Place had to be

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sold – the prospectus devoted a whole page to a photograph of our big imported American fridge. We had had all this money and the most wonderful lifestyle and suddenly we had nothing.