

A wooden bookshelf filled with numerous old, leather-bound books. The books are arranged in several rows, with some spines showing gold-tooled patterns. The lighting is warm, highlighting the texture of the wood and the aged paper of the books.

# THE UNTIMELY DEMISE OF FOTHERINGTON-TOMAS

A short story by

**R.A. Gregory**

**The Untimely Demise of Fotherington-Tomas**

**By R.A. Gregory**

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### **Begin Reading...**

It was noon when Maxwell arrived at the cottage. He closed the green picket gate behind him and crunched down the raked gravel path towards the door. When he reached it, he knocked three times and stood back. The sound of shuffling footsteps could be heard along the hallway behind and, after a short pause, the door was answered by Sarah. She looked haggard and careworn, and was holding a rake, but somehow managed to maintain her impeccable British composure.

“Maxwell. So good to see you. Please excuse the rake, but Gilley the gardener is off sick with Bloat Foot again. There’s a kettle boiling in the kitchen. Would you care for a cup of tea?” she said.

Bugger the tea, thought Maxwell. He bent forward and gave Sarah a perfunctory kiss on the cheek, then dropped his swordstick into the umbrella holder by the front door. It was hard to believe, but right now, there were more important things in the world, than tea. For one thing, his best friend was in the other room, dying.

“How is he doing?” asked Maxwell. The tip of his waxed moustache twitched, as he waited for Sarah’s reply.

“Not so well, I’m afraid. The doctor says that he only has a few hours left, which is why I sent you that telegram. He really does care for you, you know. Even if he doesn’t always show it,” she said. Her voice faded into a quiet sob and she dabbed the corner of one eye with a dainty, yet, well-used, floral handkerchief.

“I know, Sarah. I know. Which is why I got the nine-thirty express from Paddington. I could have got the ten-fifteen stopper service, but I wanted to make sure that I got here before, well, you know... the inevitable happens.”

“Well, you’d better go in and see him then. I would come with you, but I can’t. It’s just too painful for me at the moment,” she replied. “I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me.”

“Thank you, Sarah. I shall be fine,” said Maxwell. Then, after rolling his shoulders to stop himself from slouching and repeating one of the Nepalese relaxation mantras that he had learnt during his time with the Gurkhas, he entered the living room.

There, sitting in a wicker rocking chair, with a woollen travelling blanket covering his knees and listening to the first test at Headingley, was the man himself. Fotherington-Tomas. Double first from Oxford, Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons at twenty-two and a proud member of the Order of the Old British Empire. There were few men of his ilk left in the world, because Fotherington-Tomas had dedicated his life to exterminating them, especially if they posed a threat to the Empire, which, in his opinion, they often did. A man of great modesty, despite his imposing appearance, he had once won a drinking wager by knocking ten seconds off Bannister’s time for the mile but had refused to claim the record, because it was not done under precisely the same conditions as the original.

“Come on you bastards!” Fotherington-Tomas roared at the small, portable radio, that was sitting on a dainty little table, next to his rocking chair. “You should have known he was going to bowl a googly. Even I knew that, and I can’t see the bloody pitch!”

“Good afternoon, FT,” said Maxwell, with false cheer in his voice. “How are you doing?”

“What?” said Fotherington-Tomas. He looked at the radio with deep suspicion and then turned his head, to spy Maxwell approaching. “Ah, Maxwell, dear boy. So glad that you could make it. How is London and more importantly, how is Liz? Fully recovered from the Klipschstein incident, I hope?”

“London is fine, thank you, FT. Although it’s not the same without you. As for her Majesty, well, she was understandably shaken by the whole experience, but yes, she has made a tremendous recovery and sends her sincere thanks to you,” replied Maxwell.

“Glad to hear that she’s on the mend, although I wish like hell the same was true for me,” said Fotherington-Tomas. He gave Maxwell a thin smile. “I

still don't know how Dr Mephostus managed to smuggle that Death Ray into the Duke's palace in the first place."

"He always was a wily one, FT," said Maxwell. He looked, with fondness, at his best friend since University and wondered, not for the first time that day, how much time the great man had left.

"He was too. You are right about that. And he got me. Got me good, Maxwell. A man doesn't take a full hit from a Death Ray and just shrug it off, I can tell you. Still, it was a small price to pay, all things considered," said Fotherington-Tomas. He reached over to the table and switched the radio off with a loud click.

"Well, you did save the Queen and I have to say that you seem to be doing remarkably well for someone, who, as you put it, took a full hit from a Death Ray," gulped Maxwell. His eyes began to fill with tears, but he banished them with a few, quick blinks and a surreptitious snort into his own, white, cotton handkerchief. "I mean your beard is a little ragged and you look like you haven't slept for a day or two, but apart from that you appear unscathed!"

"Saving her Majesty was just duty, Maxwell. Any Englishman worth his salt would do the same. One day you will understand that, I hope. As for my condition, well, that is the awful thing about Dr Mephostus' Death Ray. It eats you from the inside out. Oh, and talking about eating, do feel free to help yourself to fruit cake. It's over there by the fireplace. I would have a slice, but I have no stomach for it at present," said Fotherington-Tomas. He pointed to the dining table on the other side of the room, where a delicious, home-baked fruit cake, sat on a glass platter, covered with a white, cotton net to keep the flies off.

Maxwell walked over the shag-pile rug and cut himself a healthy slab of cake. "But you must be in terrible pain," he said.

"Ah, pain is all in the mind, my dear boy," replied Fotherington-Tomas. "I suppose for the average person my discomfort would lie somewhere between excruciating and agonising. However, as well you know, I trained under the Abbot Victor Falangies and his Children of the D'arned Ned,

when I left University. As a result, I am able to control all aspects of my physical existence, using my mind. So, no, I am not experiencing any real pain, although the fact that you are eating fruit cake with your fingers and not with the proper fork is causing me a significant amount of distress at this precise moment!” He fixed Maxwell with a disapproving stare.

“Sorry, FT!” said Maxwell. His apology was accompanied by a mouthful of cake crumbs, which sprayed across the gap between them and landed on the rug, like a shower of fruity snowflakes.

“Don’t worry about it. Sarah will clean up the mess. Now, I haven’t much time left, so I must prepare myself before I depart this mortal coil for the next great adventure. By all means, remain with me, just don’t interrupt and please, eat quietly.”

With that, Fotherington-Tomas closed his eyes and began to ready himself for his impending journey to the other side. Maxwell watched the hypnotic rise and fall of the huge man’s chest and considered his own, fragile mortality. When my time comes, I wish that I could face it with as much dignity as FT, he thought. Another wave of tears, which he knew that his friend would consider unbecoming of a gentleman, threatened to overwhelm him and he gulped, as he tried to choke them back.

“Well, that might come a bit sooner than you expect, old boy!” Fotherington-Tomas’ voice shattered the meditative silence of the room and made Maxwell jump. “You did, after all, get a hefty dose of Strontium-40 from Aldo Passlington’s henchman, when we went to see U2 in Hungary last month. He slipped it into your pitcher of Gin and Tonic during the interval, when you were chatting up Arch-Duke Olivano’s child-bride. I thought you might like to know, so you can put your affairs in order and all that. Oh, and I can read minds too, so thank you for the compliment and yes, blubbing is a most unsuitable pastime for a man of your impeccable breeding!”

“What! You mean to say that I’m going to die?” spluttered Maxwell.

“Ha, ha! Got you!” cried Fotherington-Tomas. A tear of mirth leaked from his own eye and he wrapped his arms around himself in delight. “I was just joshing with you, Maxwell. Just joshing with you. After all, what’s the

point in living, if you can't have a joke at your friend's expense, especially when you, yourself, are dying?"

"Yes. Yes. Very funny," replied Maxwell. He hated it when FT made him the brunt of a joke because he never saw it coming.

Suddenly, Fotherington-Tomas' expression grew serious and a flicker of pain crossed his face. "I fear that the moment is approaching, Maxwell. Be a good fellow and go fetch Sarah, please."

"Of course! Hold on, my friend!" said Maxwell. He dashed from the living room and into the tiny kitchen, at the other end of the hall. Moments later, he returned with Sarah in tow. They both stopped in surprise when they entered the room. The space where Fotherington-Tomas had been, was empty, with only a light scattering of fine dust and his old, wooden pipe, sitting on top of the travelling blanket, to mark where he had been.

"He must have completely disintegrated! There couldn't have been anything left of him in the end!" wailed Sarah. She turned and buried her face into Maxwell's broad shoulder for the meagre comfort that it offered.

My God, the sheer amount of willpower that it must have taken to hold himself together like that, thought Maxwell. He stared at the wicker, rocking chair, with a mixture of disbelief and unashamed awe. As he watched, a small gust of warm, summer air, blew through the open window of the living room and swept the dust that had been Fotherington-Tomas, up into a little whirlwind, before scattering it among the crumbs of fruit cake that were still lying on the floor.

Sarah sniffed and pushed herself off Maxwell's shoulder. "Well, life goes on, I suppose," she declared. Then, she straightened her pinafore and left the living room, to go and fetch a dustpan and brush.

Maxwell stood in the middle of the room, dumbfounded by the unusual way that his friend had passed away. At least the funeral will be cheap, he mused. Then the realisation hit him that Fotherington-Tomas was really gone. Defender of the Realm, clandestine agent to Her Majesty, spin bowler extraordinaire and general, all-round, top chap; the human mammoth was no



more. Who would save them now from the evil depredations of Dr Mephostus and his crazed minions? Who would battle the Mad Monks of Mont Blanc, the Iron Men of Kazrakastan and the multitude of central European dissidents that crept out of the woodwork at the most inconvenient of moments? Not him, that was for sure. No, he had a nice, cushy job back in Whitehall, with an endless supply of tea and postage stamps to look forward to. Someone else would have to take up the slack.

At that moment, there was a knock at the front door.

Sarah's voice drifted down the hallway, from the kitchen. "Could you get that, please Maxwell?" she called out.

Maxwell walked towards the door and feared the worst. Fotherington-Tomas had only been dead for a matter of minutes, so how could his enemies have found out so fast?

He flicked the latch with a trembling hand and then breathed a sigh of relief. There, standing in the doorway, was nothing more ominous than a common or garden postman.

"Afternoon, sir. I have a telegram for a Mister Fotherington-Tomas," said the postman. He proffered a slip of yellow paper in Maxwell's direction, his face full of pleasant cheer in the lunchtime sun.

"I'm afraid that Mister Fotherington-Tomas has gone away, and I don't think that he will be back for quite some time," replied Maxwell. He pushed the telegram back towards the postman.

"That's not a problem, Mister Maxwell, sir. I am sure that you will be able to help us, instead. Her Majesty is counting upon it, in fact," countered the postman. He dropped the telegram onto the doorstep between them and turned on his heel down the raked gravel path.

Bugger, thought Maxwell for the second time that day. If the Queen wanted something done, then there was no way that he could get out of it. Duty. That's what it was. Duty. "Well FT, it looks as if the story continues with me," he said, to no one in particular. Then he retrieved the missive from

the floor and closed the door behind him, with a gentle thump.

Once back in the living room, Maxwell scooped Fotherington-Tomas' pipe from the chair and without thinking, stuck it into the corner of his mouth. Moments later, the sound of a piece of folded paper being opened, could be heard in the empty hallway, followed by a gasp and a curse, as Maxwell read what the glorious Empire was demanding of him this time.

**THE END...**

**But more will most certainly follow...**

If you liked this little tale, which I hope you did, then please leave a positive review on Amazon.com

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### **About the author**

R.A. Gregory (a.k.a. Robin Alexander Gregory, or just plain old Rob Gregory) is an author and animal welfare expert, who splits his time predominantly between Northern Thailand and New Zealand, writing books and helping people to help animals. He doesn't worry too much about what he writes about, just hopes that it makes people of all ages smile and think for themselves about the world that they live in.

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