

Robert Wexelblatt

THE EX-CONSUL

Harry Frager's final post was at the largest American consulate in Europe. The building looked like a hefty slice of the Pentagon. The place was always bustling, busy with the troubles of members of the military and their families, the entanglements and deaths of expatriates, business people wanting help, the contretemps of reckless students and the arrests of boorish tourists. The Consul General, Frager's boss, was an oilman and a friend of the President's, a famous bundler; that is, a wealthy contributor who gathered up other rich contributors the way peasants used to sheaves. As Deputy Principal Officer, Frager saw to pretty much everything save for banquets and receptions. The Consul General prided himself on being from the Lone Star State, his Italian suits, his third wife, and what he called, with only the haziest irony, "my gift for delegation". Frager's career ended shortly after he imprudently let slip some candid remarks about the current Administration. In deference to his rank and years of service, he was given an extra day to clear out his desk. As he was doing so, the boss came by to deliver a cynical comment and a farewell present. "I'm surprised, Frager. I thought you were a professional diplomat." The gift was a cook book called *No Mess Texas Cuisine*.

It was because of this book that Harry Frager inadvertently became a local hero.

Over his thirty-two-year career, Frager was seldom in the United States, a Thanksgiving here, a funeral there. During their marriage, his adventurous wife preferred they take their vacations in places like Borneo, Mongolia, and Lapland. Jeanne was a good ad for *joi de vivre* and some of that rubbed off on Frager, or rather it neutralized his melancholy tendencies.

An orphan, only child, and now a childless, retired widower, Frager suddenly found himself exiled to his native land. He spent a week in New York but there was too much of everything there—people, buildings, noise, culture—and so he moved into a hotel in Boston, a city he thought of as both lively and provincial, cleaving to tradition yet seething with young people. He strolled around the Common, traipsed the Freedom Trail, read the real estate advertisements, and rented a car. He thought he might settle in one

of Boston's less flashy suburbs. The joke in the trade, one real estate agent confided, was that buyers should drive west until they could afford the mortgage.

The place Frager chose to live wasn't all that far west, close enough to the city to have both townies and commuters. Frager, being neither, briefly entertained a fantasy of joining the Unitarian church and participating in town meetings. If he felt isolated, it wasn't the town's fault. In fact, the place suited him well enough, and his new house, the first he'd ever owned, gave him both the odd thrill of owning property and something to do.

He pattered around the two-bedroom Cape with the gray clapboards and green shutters. His spurts of domestic activity were purposive, even necessary, but somehow felt like improvisations. His wife had been the clever shopper; Frager wilted after half an hour. So, he bought his new furniture at one store in one day. He found a place that sold kitchen gadgets, curtains and linens. One hour went to hanging his pictures and installing LED bulbs. Hedges surrounded the front yard so he went to the hardware store and picked out a hedge trimmer and, as there was grass, a lawnmower as well. They had a garden store jutting into the parking lot. He took a cart and in ten minutes filled it with hosta, spirea, hibiscus, daylilies, then, on the way to the cashier, dropped in a bag of daffodil bulbs. He had to go back inside for a shovel.

The real estate agent who sold him the place was what his wife would have called *soignée*. She had expensive hair and drove a new black Audi. She had shown him several other properties in his price range, places with more space, more interesting or eccentric floorplans, more land.

"I'm curious," she said when the deal was struck. "Why'd you choose this house?"

Frager said, "Because it looks like you could just hose it out."

The agent handed over cards for a home inspector, an insurance agent, the local bank. He signed the purchase and sale agreement without haggling. She advised against a balloon mortgage.

"Okay, then. That's it. Get the inspection done. I'll see you at the closing."

Frager needed a project, a mental one, and thought he would like to write a scholarly article. He hadn't written anything of that sort since graduate school. That was when one of his professors, impressed by the ease with which he picked up languages, asked about his career goals. When Frager said he wasn't sure, the professor suggested he look into the foreign service. So, he had never felt a vocation; his career was in this sense accidental, *faute de mieux*. He took the exam, passed the security check, and was hired. It turned out that he liked the work and the travel too, at least before his wife got cancer.

Write what you know. The article would be about about diplomacy. He had been a consul or deputy consul in lots of places and kept learning languages. But writing didn't come as easily as Turkish or Uzbek.

One morning, determined to get something down, he made coffee, gritted his teeth, and sat down at the computer.

Nothing came. Nada, zilch, rien. Then, with a smile, he typed, *Jewish husbands make the best slaves.*

When he came home from school on Wednesdays, his mother was usually playing mah jongg with three of her girlfriends. They'd grown up together, called themselves the Tootsies, had no secrets, and talked non-stop as the tiles clacked. Three dot. Two bamboo. They were of a generation and a class that seldom moved away or made careers and the longer they played and gossiped, the younger these women grew. Sometimes, Frager felt older than they were.

One Wednesday, as he came through the door, he heard his mother say, "Of course, Jewish husbands make the best slaves." This remark was greeted with girlish laughter.

A month or two later, he and his mother were shopping in Sears. She was looking for something in the stationery department where a dozen brands of typewriters were on display, each with a piece of paper on the platen. Frager typed *Jewish husbands make the best slaves* on every one then showed his mother.

She pretended to be furious, denied ever saying such a thing. It was hilarious. He went on teasing her about the sentence until it became a private joke between them.

Though Frager couldn't write he went on typing.

Slaves make the best Jewish husbands.

Husbands, make the best Jewish slaves!

The summer after the end of tenth grade, Frager signed up for a typing class. It was the most useful course he took in high school. Mrs. Roth was the Platonic idea of an office manager, champion and paragon of an insurance company's typing pool. Always professionally dressed, strict and nonsense-free as a pin, she was a good teacher. In addition to typing, she offered sound office advice. For example, she told her pupils always to fold any sheet of paper they discarded before throwing it in the wastebasket. "It saves room," she explained. It became a lifelong habit for Frager.

Before applying to graduate school in International Relations, he'd looked up the word *diplomacy*. It derived from the Greek for something folded in two, originally a document that conferred some privilege, like a passport. This was in the days before envelopes. Diplomacy, double, diploma, duplicity.

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dogs.

Mrs. Roth made them type that sentence over and over. “It uses the whole alphabet,” she explained with her usual economy. Frager made an error, typed it again, then went on:

Lazy brown fox, quick! The dogs jumped over.

Lazy dogs jumped quick over the brown fox.

No writing going on, only typing, only rearranging.

Now is the time for all good men.

The time is now, all good men.

Good men, now is the time for all.

The best slaves. Lazy dogs and brown foxes. Good men.

Frager, bored and frustrated, gave up. The grass was mown, the hedges trimmed, the plants watered. He decided on a different project for the afternoon, cooking. In the Consul General’s cook book, he found a recipe for chili. A big pot of Texas chili sounded good. There would be dinners for half a week.

The recipe called for ground chuck, red kidney beans, crushed tomatoes, tomato paste, chili powder, onions, garlic, parsley, oregano, basil, cumin, celery, sugar, salt, green pepper, Tabasco sauce, and a bottle of Lone Star beer —“the indispensable ingredient”.

On the way to the supermarket, he decided to make some changes: a hot pepper instead of a green one, cayenne pepper instead of Tabasco sauce, no stringy celery. He had no beer, no alcohol in the house at all.

Over dinner one night, his father said that one of their neighbors’ marriage was on the rocks. His mother knew all about it. “Margie says he’s taken to drinking alone,” she had murmured portentously, “one of the first signs.” The warning had stuck with Frager, like the folding of wastepaper. “Social drinking” was okay because the glass is a kind of prop, but never drink by yourself. He hadn’t had so much as a glass of merlot or a dram of single malt since leaving the service and buying into a suburb.

Frager had an idea. He’d mess with Texas and pour in a bottle of stout instead of Lone Star which wouldn’t be available in New England anyway.

Raleigh Liquors was on the corner of a strip mall next to Lucky Licks, the local ice cream parlor. Frager parked in the lot and started to the store. He was checking the cash in his wallet when he got to the door so he was shocked when it flew open, just missing his face, and he collided with a man in a balaclava rushing out. He didn’t see the man or the knife either. The knife went flying, so it didn’t matter. The man crashed on top of Frager, swore, and tried to scramble to his feet, but their legs were tangled.

“Hold him!” yelled the young clerk.

Fragger embraced the robber and held on while the clerk jumped on top of the both of them. The store manager, a woman who looked like she saw this sort of thing monthly, leaned casually in the doorway, coolly phoning the police on her cellphone.

There was an article in the local paper picked up by both a TV station and the *Globe*. The angle was ridiculous, something like *from mild-mannered diplomat to crime fighter*. Frager declined credit and to be photographed, but there were plenty of pictures of him on Google. The *Globe* chose one ten years out of date when he had more hair, fewer wrinkles, and brighter eyes. He was in his diplomat costume so he looked like a consul rather than a habitué of liquor stores.

The consequences were good, though. The Guinness was on the house and the neighbors began to nod to him. He got a thumbs-up from local men driving by and a brace of women stopped by with admiring faces and tollhouse cookies.

That wasn't quite the end of it. There were also a pair of emails.

The chief business of a consul is business—promoting deals, making introductions, greasing the skids of profit. This was not Frager's favorite part of the job. He preferred the personal to the corporate and, while he regretted the messes his fellow citizens and local dissidents got into, he did enjoy getting them out of them when he could.

Somehow Sheila Romano found his email address—the official one was extinct, of course—but she did and wrote this:

Hi, Mr. Frager.

You probably won't remember me but I certainly remember you. I always will. Eight years ago, you got me out of jail in Izmir. I was backpacking that summer with my stupid, selfish pothead boyfriend. Jeff made me carry his stash because he said Muslim cops would never search a woman. You came to see me in that awful place and you were so kind. Remember bringing me a pack of Oreos? A life-saver, like you. You contacted my parents and told me you'd do everything you could for me. And whatever everything was, it worked.

I saw an article about you catching a thief. It said you'd left the service and hinted that you'd been replaced. If the Administration did that, then it's just like Jeff. In fact, minus the weed, it is.

I'm married now, a registered nurse with two sweet boys. My husband's a Methodist minister (of all things) and we live in Oklahoma City.

I just wanted to thank you again and wish you all good things. As my husband would say, bless you.

The second email was from someone Frager remembered very well. It was written in Bulgarian.

My honored friend,

It has come to my attention that you have retired and caught a thief. The first is regrettable; the second is unusual. But you are an unusual man. A just man. After all, as a practical matter, justice means putting some people in jail and getting others out.

I am thinking that perhaps retiring was not your idea? Perhaps you disagreed with somebody who needed to be disagreed with? I know something about that.

Six years ago, in response to my exposé in the short-lived journal *Choveshki Prava*, I was tossed in a dungeon, interrogated, beaten, tortured, charged with sedition and the release of state secrets. An additional charge of embezzlement was added later, to show that my arrest was not political.

You made it your business to get me out, Mr. Frager. You didn't have to, but you crusaded for me. You made a public statement to the press and induced your Secretary of State to issue an official condemnation. Maybe all that was sufficient to secure my freedom, but I doubt it. On the one occasion that we met, you declined to tell me more but, however you managed my release, I am eternally in your debt.

I would like you to know that I now reside in Berlin where I continue my work on behalf of the rights of every single human being.

With gratitude and respect,

Vasil Chintalov

Frager had gotten Chintalov released by so far exceeding his brief that his career could easily have ended even earlier. He set up a private meeting with the Interior Minister to which he brought along a stick and a carrot. The former was the promise that all the Minister's assets in the United States would be frozen, the American banking system closed to him and the whole of his corrupt family. The carrot was the promise to find his youngest son a place in an American university. He actually did the latter. There was a certain admissions officer in Michigan, a poker player who in his Navy days had required some consular assistance.

Frager did two tours in Central America. A young American priest, inspired by the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, had come south to work with the indigenous farmers seeking land reform. He joined in field work, improved his accent, and delivered some rousing sermons.

While he was biking between villages, a car drove the priest off the road. Three masked men leapt out. None said a word as they delivered a ferocious beating. One of the attackers smashed the priest's bike with a tire iron, then his tibia. Nobody doubted that the attackers were disguised police.

Fragar went to the hospital. The young priest's face was swollen. There were bandages around his torso; his right leg was in traction.

"They might have killed you," he said.

Though distorted, the priest's voice was firm. "Nearly did. We're all in God's hands, Mr. Fragar, especially when doing His work."

"I can arrange for you to go home."

The priest groaned and shook his head. "No."

Fragar sighed. He knew that those convinced of their own virtue are the most intransigent.

"What can I do for you?"

"Convince the government to help me in my work instead of arming the men who slaughter the poor."

Fragar nodded, got to his feet, and said he'd be back.

During his second visit, Fragar asked the priest if he knew about the Peasants Uprising in Germany.

"Of course. Luther condemned them."

"That's true. But he also inspired them."

Fragar took out three folded papers and read from the first.

In Christendom all things are in common and each man's goods are the other's, and nothing is simply a man's own. The common man has long been brooding over the injury he has received in property, in body, and in soul. If I had ten bodies, I would most gladly give all to death in behalf of these poor men.

"Very fine words."

"Stirring ones. Luther's. When those words aroused the peasants and serfs, Luther wrote that he wanted to change people's relation to God, not to each other. Serfdom was fine with him and he wrote a pamphlet condemning the peasants as robbers and murderers, calling for violence against them. When he published his notorious tract, the poor men replied with one of their own. They threw Luther's words back in his face and wrote with great dignity."

Fragar unfolded the second sheet of paper and read.

Seeing that Christ has redeemed and bought us all with the precious shedding of his blood, the lowly as well as the great, we will retreat from our demands only if the social order is explained to us with arguments from Scripture. Otherwise we demand that each receive for his work according to the several necessities of all.

The priest smiled. "It's Marx before the fact."

"At Frankenhausem, the peasants had pitchforks and clubs. The overlords had cavalry and cannon. It was a massacre."

"The struggle is hard and long."

Fragger leaned forward. "You want to be a martyr? Isn't that a temptation?"

The priest looked younger than ever; his swollen face shone.

"We have to attend to others, not ourselves. We have to give up any personal aggrandizement and share the pain of the others, the ones we care for. The good shepherd thinks first of his flock."

"And what if the shepherd leads the flock to a cliff?"

"Offering hope to the oppressed always leads to retaliation by those who profit from their despair. Isn't that what happened at Frankenhausem?"

"There are other ways."

"Have you suggested them to the government?"

"More than once."

"With what result?"

Fragger was silent.

"The great sin of our time," said the priest as if giving a sermon, "is seeing oneself as the center of the universe."

"Where is the center?"

"Outside of us."

"God doesn't intervene."

"No. God is outside. He's waiting. You aren't a believer, are you?"

"No. Mostly not."

"Mostly?"

"Yes. I'm *that* kind of Jew."

"So, the God you don't believe in is the one who intervenes, the God of judgment? The omnipotent one? God is good before He is powerful."

Fragger nodded and unfolded the third piece of paper. He read.

There is no quality and there is no power of man that was created to no purpose. Even base and corrupt qualities can be uplifted to serve God. To what end can the denial of God have been created? This too can be uplifted through deeds of charity. For if someone comes to you and asks your help, you shall not turn him off with pious words, saying, "Have faith and take your troubles to God!" You shall act as if there were no God, as if there were only one person in all the world who could help this man—only you."

“That was said long ago by Moshe Leib, a rabbi.”

“And well said. Your rabbi understands. What’s more, I think you do, too.”

In that country at that time, American diplomats were afforded considerable deference. Frager had no trouble arranging a visit with the local Chief of Police, a man no less convinced of his virtue than the priest, and just as sure that he was a good Catholic.

The Chief sat behind a desk as substantial as he was. His uniform was clean and well pressed. The walls of his office were hung with framed photographs of him graduating, posing formally with his family, standing and smiling next to the President and the Bishop. There were pre-Columbian antiquities on the credenza and a bookcase with few books. He was large without being fat, had an intelligent face, and was about fifty. The Chief exuded confidence and a kind of refined brutality.

Frager was shown in and announced by a lieutenant.

The Chief stood and held out his hand. Skipping the niceties, he spoke at once. It was disarming.

“You’re here about your countryman, that naïve priest so deplorably attacked on the road.”

Frager took the offered hand. “I am,” he said.

“I assure you, Mr. Frager, we are investigating. It is a most regrettable incident.”

“Then I ask you to guarantee his safety. I visited him in the hospital. There were no guards.”

The Chief motioned for Frager to take a seat then sat himself.

“Who can offer such guarantees, especially in the current state of unrest? The hospital is safe and I have no men to spare.”

Frager was silent for a few seconds.

“I’ve heard that you attend Mass every morning.”

The Chief pretended to be pleasantly surprised. “You’re well informed.”

“The church is dedicated to Saint Augustine, I believe.”

“Yes. The great Father of the Church.”

“You’ve read him?”

“My Jesuit teachers made sure of it. Augustine understood many things. He said it is our moral duty to respect the right to property and to obey the law.”

“Only the *just* laws.”

“Mr. Frager, our country has no unjust laws, though there are many who desire lawlessness.”

“And what if the property is stolen?”

“As to land, in this country it must be lawfully registered. In those rare instances when we discover it is not, we act.”

Frager paused again.

“You don’t approve of what my young countryman is doing?”

“No, I do not, sir. And neither should you. Your young priest is a zealot for Karl Marx, not Jesus Christ. In my opinion, he ought to be re-educated or defrocked.”

The Chief leaned back, enjoying the discussion. He pointed to the photograph of himself with the bishop, both of them in uniform.

“I am no less a shepherd than our good Bishop Gonzalez. I’m sure you’ve observed that our people are childish and have to be kept in order for their own benefit. They must be shown their duty to obey the law, including the laws regarding property. God is the supreme property owner and it is our job to see that God’s property is well tended.”

“By those who own it lawfully?”

Here it was the Chief who paused.

“Mr. Frager, because people are endowed with free will but also with selfishness, the natural condition of humanity is not justice but injustice. Injustice is disorder. Our country is not like yours, not yet so orderly. I agree that certain of our actions are less than desirable, even sometimes a necessary evil. But in a state of disorder and rebellion what is necessary is good.”

“It’s not always easy to say what evil is necessary or how much.”

The Chief folded his hands and smiled, relishing a game in which he had the upper hand. He probably had few such conversations.

“You mentioned Augustine,” said the Chief. “The saint said that only God is perfect and all that God creates is good. Perfection cannot be corrupted, but what is merely good can be. The unfortunate truth is that people tend to lose part of their goodness, much of it, in fact. Evil is the absence of good but, even in the most depraved or misguided, you can still find some good. So, what needs to be done is to extirpate the evil. That is the way to cultivate the good—tear out the weeds and the grain can flourish. It is how I serve the state and God.”

“They are the same?”

The Chief put his hands down flat on his desk.

“The Roman Empire was hardly a perfectly just organization; yet Augustine did not try to overthrow it. All sins are not crimes, but all crimes are sins. So, yes. I serve God by serving the State. Surely, Mr. Frager, somebody in your position, somebody who represents his government, must know that.”

Frager paid one last visit to the hospital.

The young priest was feeling better and said he would be released at the end of the next week.

“You’ll go back to what you were doing?”

“Certainly. It’s how I serve God.”

“That’s a consolation? That you’re serving God?”

“The greatest.”

“I’m glad for you. But don’t you think that consolation can sometimes be a hindrance?”

“How?”

“Have you read Simone Weil?”

“A woman to put us all to shame.”

“Didn’t she deny herself the consolation of baptism?”

“Yes, but she believed. She was a Catholic outside the Church. It’s noble.”

“What?”

“That she’d say she didn’t want to cut herself off from non-believers.”

“Ah. But didn’t she turn her back on her fellow Jews, her forebears?”

“Not really.”

“Not even the non-believing ones, like me?”

The young man smiled which made him look about sixteen years old. “You’ve reminded me of something else she wrote.”

He paused.

“What was it?”

“Sorry. I was trying to recall the exact words. It’s a hard saying—harder for me than for you, I think.”

Fragar waited, looking at the jacaranda outside the window.

“I think it went like this. Of two men who have no experience of God, the one who denies him is nearer to him than the other.”

“I know of a rabbi who might agree,” said Frager and smiled at the doomed young man who claimed to be consoled.

Shortly after, Frager was told he would be reassigned and granted a month’s leave. He took it in the south of France and registered at his old pension in Nice, the Verdun. It was on the beach at Nice that he had met the perfect, adventurous Jeanne, as doomed by a mutated gene as the priest was by his faith. They had honeymooned there as well.

Fragar picked up his customary copy of *Le Monde* on the way to the café where he was known. He was brought his brioche and coffee without needing to order. He sat in his usual spot and opened the paper. On page two he learned that the mutilated body found on a mountain road in South America had

been identified as that of a young American priest. In empty, flowery language, the government expressed its official regret. The Chief of Police was quoted as saying that an investigation was underway.

Frager's article never took proper shape. What he wrote was rather a series of digressions, not very scholarly ones either.

He began with Benjamin Franklin. Franklin, he thought, was not only America's first ambassador but the most significant. But, instead of Franklin's diplomacy, Frager found himself writing about his headgear.

When Congress appointed him Minister to the French Court, Franklin sailed to Nantes and was wined and dined everywhere along the 150-mile route to Paris. Frager found that, according to a Frenchman of the time, everybody had "an engraving of Monsieur Franklin over the mantelpiece." When he joined Franklin in Paris, Adams groused jealously. "Franklin's reputation is greater than that of Newton, Frederick the Great or Voltaire, his character more revered than them all." But for that popularity, Frager mused, there might have been no Comtes de Rochambeau and Grasse besieging Yorktown and blocking the British fleet on Chesapeake Bay. And what was the source of Franklin's cachet with the French? Wanting to write of the historical abstract, Frager felt drawn to the quirky particular.

When he arrived in the capital, Franklin sported a small fur cap on his bald head. To the gathered crowd, evidently readers of Rousseau, America was à la mode and the fur cap proved Franklin was a rugged frontiersman with all the virtues of Jean Jacques' splendid savage. Never mind that he had won the Copley Medal, founded the University of Pennsylvania and most of the rest of the civic institutions of Philadelphia, wrote and published *Poor Richard's Almanac*, never mind the sophisticated wit, the inventions; never mind the kite and key.

What Frager admired in Franklin, what he believed made him an exceptional diplomat, was his understanding of human nature. Another man with such accomplishments might have indignantly corrected the silly assessment of the French. "A noble savage? *Moi?*" But Franklin made use of it. He sent home for a large supply of fur caps and made sure to wear one everywhere he went.

Thinking about the fur cap led Frager to recall a favorite story about Franklin. He had read it long ago in a book about practical jokes given to him as a graduation present by his freshman roommate, who had been exasperatingly fond of playing practical jokes. The gift itself was a practical joke.

Traveling on horseback through New England in winter weather, Franklin arrived at a tavern in the evening, half-frozen, starving, and wet. After having his horse stabled, he hurried into the tavern where he found all the seats near the fire filled with locals. He stood about shivering and dripping but no one made a place for him. He called for the landlord. "Do you have any oysters?" The landlord said that he did. "Good," said Franklin. "I want you to serve half a bushel and of them to my horse." This attracted general

attention. The landlord argued, but Franklin insisted. When the landlord started toward the stable with the pail of oysters, all the layabouts got up and followed. They'd never seen a horse that ate oysters. When they came back, Franklin had made himself comfortable in the best seat by the hearth. "Your horse won't eat the oysters," complained the landlord. "In that case," said Franklin serenely, bring them here and roast them on the fire. They'll do very well for my supper."

There they are, thought Frager, all the talents of the diplomat: thinking ahead, knowing what motivates those who frustrate you, deception, manipulation, self-interest. American independence was the seat by the hearth; the displaced loafers were le Roi's bankrupt treasury.

Thinking about the country's first ambassador led Frager to look into the country's first consul. This turned out to be James Maury, Jr, appointed American consul in Liverpool by George Washington. Suspecting things worked then as they do now, it was no surprise that Maury had been a classmate of Thomas Jefferson who got Washington to appoint him. Liverpool was an important port and Maury was already doing business there. A lot of American businesses in Liverpool wanted their way smoothed and there was no dearth of American sailors getting into scrapes. Maury must have done his job well. He held it for thirty-nine years.

Frager figured Maury must have died at his post but this was not the case. Andrew Jackson replaced him. Given his own situation, this interested Frager. The record didn't say why Maury was fired, but he could speculate. Jackson handed out lots of appointments to supporters; he not only invented the Spoils System, he publicly defended it. Then too, Maury was eighty-three years old. Frager found a letter Maury wrote to his son on the occasion of his stepping down. The discarded consul's words were dignified, any resentment buried under dutiful stoicism:

I have treated Mr. Ogden, I hope, with that respect due from a Consul of the United States to his successor. As to myself, I do feel rather out of joint, and I suppose I am to feel so for a time, but such things wear off and probably it will be so with me.

As it turned out, Francis B. Ogden did the United States a signal service. He befriended the inventor John Ericsson, who named his first screw-propeller steamboat the *Francis B. Ogden*. When the Royal Navy rejected Ericsson's designs, Ogden persuaded him to move to America and arranged financial backing for him. Ericsson is famous as the builder of the *U.S.S. Monitor*, the savior of the U.S. Navy at Hampton Roads.

As with Maury and Jefferson, a student friendship was behind Franklin Pierce's appointment of Nathaniel Hawthorne to the Liverpool post. The author despised the job yet performed it well. Frager looked into Hawthorne's journal and found that being consul in Liverpool offended his fastidiousness. American sailors he describes as "dirty, desperate, and all together pirate-like." He loathed visiting prisons,

hospitals, asylums, inquests, and courtrooms. He seems to have been repelled by those he assisted, “all manner of simpletons and unfortunates.” Almost the worst of all, he confided to his journal, were the Englishmen pretending to be Yankees. As a diplomat, it seems the upright Hawthorne was more often a victim of duplicity than a practitioner.

Diplomats have always been ethically suspect, even to themselves. The Jacobean politician Sir Henry Wotton, an ambassador, had the first famous one-liner on the matter: “An ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country.” In his desultory reading, Frager had come across a couplet about what “being diplomatic” means to most people. It was composed by the writer and translator Isaac Goldberg, another deracinated Jew:

*Diplomacy is to do and say
The nastiest things in the nicest way.*

Tact and lying, lying tactfully. A folded paper.

Frager was thirty years younger than James Maury, Jr. was when he began his forced retirement. He would have liked to know what the old man did during his last nine years.

Frager knew he had to find something to do, something more than not writing articles and mowing the lawn. Retirement didn’t suit him; it might even kill him. It was absurd. He lived alone in a neighborhood of families. He was a phony hero, certainly no scholar. He was not fitted to become a teacher, even if he could find a job.

Is there a sadder line in *Othello*, he thought, than the Moor’s lament, *Othello’s occupation’s gone!*

Two years earlier, Frager had attended a weekend conference in Brussels. At the closing banquet, he had been seated next to a member of the Swedish delegation. They chatted pleasantly about the conference, transatlantic politics, the weather. But, when the coffee came, the woman turned to him almost aggressively.

“They tell me that you’re a widower, and that you loved your wife dearly. I’m sorry.”

Frager recoiled. “Thanks,” he mumbled. “It’s all right.”

She persisted. “Is it? Is it really? Have you given up on women then, on sex?”

Frager’s reply was brief, blunt, undiplomatic, a message not folded, and a revelation to himself. “Not women,” he said almost brutally. “Intimacy.” Then he excused himself and made his way back to his empty hotel room.