

TELEVISION TIGHTROPE EXCERPTS

I joined the French Boy Scouts...We took a walking trip on the Isle of Wight, the southern coast of England. The third or fourth day ended in the dead of night. After a meager supper we groped around in the dark for a level spot to pitch the tent. Finally we located an ideal place, raised the tent, and dug the prescribed ditch around it to carry away water in case of rain. Exhausted, we wrapped our blankets around us and fell asleep.

Early next morning, just after dawn, a gentleman wearing a black suit and tie and bowler hat stormed into our tent, shaking its center pole and screaming uncontrollably. I had difficulty understanding the English but knew from his face, red as a tomato, that something was dreadfully wrong. He stabbed the air toward our tent opening, until we all poked our heads out. That was when we realized we had planted ourselves and dug a trench on the seventh green of a golf course. Like little Indians, we struck the tent and stole quickly away. [p 10-11]

Hollywood was a weight I grudgingly bore. In 1963 CBS decided to have Judy Garland host and star in a weekly musical variety hour. David Begelman, Garland's agent and confidant, called the shots on foreign distribution. Over lunch I outlined our successes abroad. Begelman seemed impressed.

At the end of the luncheon we shook hands. "We have a deal," he said. A few weeks later I phoned Begelman's office and they assured me everything was on track. With that I informed all of our foreign offices that we would distribute *Judy Garland*, and give it a first-rate launch.

Then we got a call from the head of our German office, Max Kimental. He said a new German TV network, ZDF, was about to start, and had announced that its opening night would include *The Judy Garland Show*. Kimental had assured ZDF that CBS had the distribution rights, and rightly was upset.

"What happened?" he asked sharply. I was as stunned as he was, and promised to find out as soon as West Coast offices opened.

I called Begelman's office and he finally came on the line. I reminded him of our meeting and handshake deal. He remembered. I told him of the telephone call from Kimental, and reminded him that we shook hands and he said "It's a deal." Begelman disputed none of it.

"David, what happened?" I asked.

"Ralph, I lie a lot."

Begelman went on to become one of the movie industry's top leaders, even after embezzling \$50,000 to cover gambling debts. In 1995, having burned one bridge too many, he checked into a Los Angeles hotel and shot himself. [p 142-43]

The party was at the home of Al Simon, producer of *Green Acres*. Eva Gabor and her husband were there. Eddie Albert brought a guitar and accompanied his wife Margo as she sang Spanish-language songs. It was lovely.

Jean had a nice party dress made for the occasion at a little boutique in the East Fifties. It was off-the-shoulder and had long sleeves in cream and rose organza with flowers and a large silk cabbage rose at the bosom. Shortly after we arrived, Eva sauntered over to us. Looking Jean up and down, she said "Dahling, I want your dress." Jean politely told her the shop where it came from, and that it had been custom-made.

“No, no, no, no, I want your dress now!”

Jean didn't know how to answer. Finally: “But it won't fit you.”

“I will have it altered. I want your dress!”

By now Jean had gathered her wits. “I'm sorry, you can't have it. It's mine.” Eva did an about-face and didn't speak to Jean the rest of the evening. [p 148]

Our new company needed a name. One day I discussed possibilities with [CBS President] Frank Stanton. He ventured that all of our work would be in communications. I agreed. Frank then suggested ViaCommunications, but we both knew that was too long.

He loved to dabble with graphic arts and said “We could abbreviate it and call it ‘VIacom,’ starting with the V, then the straight I, and then inverting the V to make an A.”

“Frank, I think that's a poor choice,” I said.

“I like it,” he answered.

Viacom it would be. [p 184]

I was increasingly concerned about Showtime, our pay-cable service. Showtime had approximately 300,000 subscribers, compared with HBO's nearly two million. We approached Teleprompter, the nation's largest cable television company, to see if they would buy part of Showtime. [They did.] Our objective was to have the 300,000 HBO subscribers on Teleprompter's cable systems switched to Showtime—doubling our base overnight.

In August 1981 Westinghouse bought Teleprompter. After the dust settled, Dan Ritchie, head of Westinghouse Broadcasting, started to attend our joint Showtime management meetings. He was a slender man who spoke slowly and chose his words carefully. Unfortunately, his keen concern over what Westinghouse offered the public came to hinder Showtime.

From the first meeting, Ritchie said we showed too many R-rated movies. Usually these movies did not air until 8 or 9 p.m., and they were what the audience demanded. Research showed these were our most watched films. Nonetheless he continued a drumbeat of objections. I was at wit's end how to satisfy him and still keep Showtime viable

The following year, President Reagan asked select communication leaders to an informal lunch in Washington. I attended and so did Robert Kirby, CEO of Westinghouse Electric, parent of Ritchie's broadcast subsidiary. I made sure I sat next to Kirby. “You know, we have a common interest in a joint venture,” I said casually.

“Oh, yes, what is that?”

“Showtime.”

“Oh, that little thing,” he said.

A bit disappointed, I answered, “What may be a little thing for you is a very big thing for us.”

“Oh, yes, I realize that, but there are too many R-rated movies on Showtime.”

Taking my courage in two hands, I said “No, as a matter of fact, there aren't enough. The audience wants R-rated movies.” Then, lying my head off, I added, “In fact, we are thinking of putting X-rated movies on Showtime at about midnight.” I knew Viacom would never do that.

“Oh, no, you mustn't!” said Kirby, horror on his face.

“Well, we are thinking about it,” I answered, enjoying his discomfiture.

Shortly after the Washington event Dan Ritchie called and asked me to lunch at the Manhattan Ocean Club. He said Westinghouse had decided to sell its interest in Showtime back to Viacom. Silently I thanked Robert Kirby. [p 248]

I had no one but myself to blame for Terry Elkes. From the start of his tenure at Viacom, I championed and promoted him against the better judgment of others. [I was now chairman and he was CEO, an arrangement I crafted three years earlier.] Jean and I took the Elkes family yachting, and socialized with Terry and his wife Ruth.

In the fall of 1986 there was a substantial change in Elkes' demeanor. Now fifty-two, he jogged almost fanatically. Several times a day he stood before the mirrored column in our outer office, combing his thick dark hair. Elkes often had spoken down to others, but not to me. Now he began to address me with the same smirk he used when answering directors' questions. He became reclusive and difficult to pin down. We had had adjoining offices for many years, and walked into the other's space at any time, threw a leg over a chair, and chatted. Almost overnight his door had shut to me. Three times I made appointments to meet with Terry. Each time his secretary canceled for him.

Finally we met. Elkes said he planned to do a leveraged buyout of Viacom, using the assets of the company to raise the funds. This seemed a good idea in view of everything that was going on with National Amusements, Coniston Partners, and others who had accumulated Viacom stock.

"We know the company better than anybody and know just where to cut without harming the core of Viacom," I said. "This is a great opportunity; we can do it extremely well." His reply stunned me.

"Ralph, you use the word 'we' all the time. I have formed a group of insiders and you are not part of it. There are seven of us who are going to do this, and you're not one of them."

My mind raced as he added, "You should realize you are dead in the water and have absolutely no power base. You are dead meat." [p 306]

It has been six decades since the *Nyassa* limped into New York harbor with our family aboard... We were part of a vanguard of refugees that would become a steady stream into the U.S. through the rest of the twentieth century.

I will always be in America's debt...In 1940, at a time of world crisis, the U.S. had all but stopped admitting refugees. An exception was made for my family and a relative handful of other men, women, and children. Otherwise we surely would have perished in Europe. Many of us came here for safe haven. A promising new beginning and equal possibility with native-born citizens also awaited us.

Television, in good part an American invention, became the ship that carried my own ambitions. I was young and so was it. We grew up together. In the process I took television to much of the world. Each time I returned home more certain that I was blessed to live in the greatest land on earth.

Thank you, America. [p 332]

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