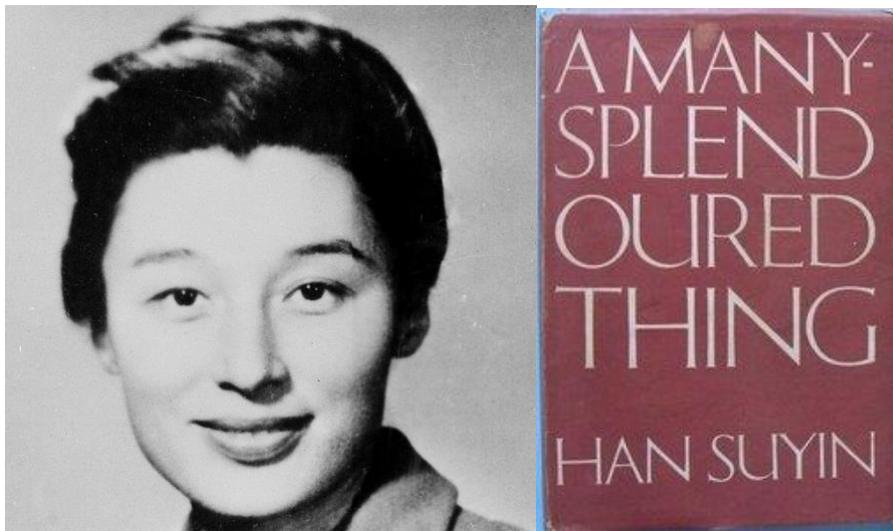


## **'Always' -A Many Splendoured Thing**

It's very rare that I read a novel, generally preferring something factual or biographical. Why read novels when factual or biographical accounts frequently contain astonishing information or events which in a novel might even seem too far-fetched or fantastical to be believable? My current reading, though described as a novel, turns out to be a thinly disguised biographical account of a passionate relationship experienced by its author, Han Suyin (real name Rosalie Matilda Kuanghu Chou) a Chinese-born female who had trained as a physician in London before returning to China. Published in 1952 and entitled 'A Splendoured Thing', it describes a love affair she shared with an Australian man she encountered in Hong Kong, having gone there to live after she fled the civil war in China which led to the communist party being established. At the centre of the story is the prejudice they encounter from her family and from the Hong Kong society in general to her affair with a foreigner, but then to quote Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – *The course of true love never did run smooth.*



That quotation connects me with a love story that certainly meets the statement made by Shakespeare and which I was reminded of when, listening recently to a BBC Regional programme <sup>(1)</sup> that ticks all the boxes in terms of what good musical listening should be, I learned that Beatles member Paul McCartney, apparently finding it difficult to deliver spoken words of love at the appropriate moments, often resorts instead to a song he has recorded that carries the message. The song is 'Always', whose music and lyrics were written by Irving Berlin in 1926, sixteen years before McCartney was born. It is appropriate that McCartney uses this as a message of love because the moving love story it connects me with lies behind this song's creation.

Our story begins back in 1912 when Berlin at the age of 23, and now firmly established as America's king of Tin Pan Alley, married Dorothy Goetz, sister of a business associate. She was only 20. They had met when, as a singer trying to progress her career, she auditioned for Berlin for one of his forthcoming productions. She failed to get the part but instead got a date with the great man himself, and soon became Mrs Berlin. They honeymooned in Havana, Cuba, a playground for Americans at that time. However, on her return from Cuba she became ill and a few weeks later died of the typhoid which she had contracted there. At his tender age of 23, Berlin therefore becomes a widower and for the next twelve years orders roses to be placed daily on her grave at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. True to his style of writing a song to express experiences in his life, and in this case to express his grief, he writes 'When I Lost You', a song later sung or recorded by

a host of popular singers including Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, Tony Bennett and Jim Reeves. A love story in itself perhaps, but perhaps just the start.

In the immediate years thereafter, Berlin immersed himself in his song-writing and publishing career, served in the US Army in WW1 and later opened his own theatre. The death of his mother in 1922 however enhanced his feeling of loss and loneliness and his writing practically dried up, the songs *All By Myself* and *What'll I Do* written in that period reflect his feeling of loss and loneliness.

Invited by friends to a dinner party one evening in 1924 he meets and subsequently dates Ellin Mackay, a socialite and daughter of multimillionaire Clarence Mackay from a second-generation immigrant Irish family, his father having become enormously rich through silver mining and telegraph communications. Ellin had been brought up as a Catholic in a staunch Catholic family. Wealthy father Clarence Mackay is a proud but fearsome man with an estate covering 648 acres and a house with 50 rooms and 134 servants and he is very unhappy at the prospect of his daughter becoming involved with a common songwriter, and an immigrant Jew at that. In an attempt to divert her attention from Berlin, Mackay takes his daughter to Europe for a year hoping that she will forget Berlin and perhaps marry a European aristocrat of the Catholic religion. He further threatens that she will lose her inheritance if she should marry Berlin.



**The fearsome Clarence Mackay**

In her initial days in Europe, and as a dutiful and dominated daughter, Ellin does indeed divert her attention from Berlin, prompting him to reflect his loss in his composition *Remember*, the final line of which is '*...you forgot to remember*'. She returns and their relationship is rekindled with the result that Ellin and Irving marry in secret in January 1926. Heavily disguised, the couple travel to the registry office by the New York subway system, the first occasion in Ellin's life that she has experienced a journey by that form of transport. Mackay who learns of the marriage from the newspapers, is furious and as threatened cuts her from his will. Berlin however ensures her future security by writing *Always* (the first line being '*I'll be loving you, always*') and he assigns all future royalties from the song to Ellin, a gesture which in time makes her \$300,000.

The newlyweds honeymoon in London staying at the luxury Carlton Hotel, a contiguous extension of His (Her) Majesties Theatre, Haymarket. (The hotel was sadly demolished in the 1960's, the site being used for the construction of the unremarkable New Zealand House which stands there today. The theatre remains and is still the home to *The Phantom Of The Opera*). They return anonymously via Quebec in August 1926. Clarence Mackay is still unforgiving however, creating a blight on the lives of the couple's otherwise happy union. Irving though remains respectful to his intolerant father-in-law.

Worse was to come when, having celebrated the birth of son Irving Jr on 1 December 1928, Ellin and Irving discovered him dead in his cot on Christmas Day. Critics of their marriage were quoted as saying “It’s God punishment for her marrying a Jew”. They were never to have a son.

The tragic death of his grandson did initiate a partial reconciliation with Clarence, but it was the Wall Street crash of 1929 which fostered a further advance in the reconciliation when Clarence lost \$36 million in less than an hour, and ultimately several times that figure – the biggest single loss by an individual in the crash. He was forced to dismiss his staff of 134 and to change his entire style of living, though Irving giving his father-in-law \$1 million. Sadly, a complete reconciliation was never achieved, Clarence never entirely coming to terms with her daughter’s choice. It is said that she appeared unmoved at his later funeral. She learned from the experience however and never repeated her father’s folly of forcing her religious beliefs on her emerging family of three daughters who later claimed to be Protestants.

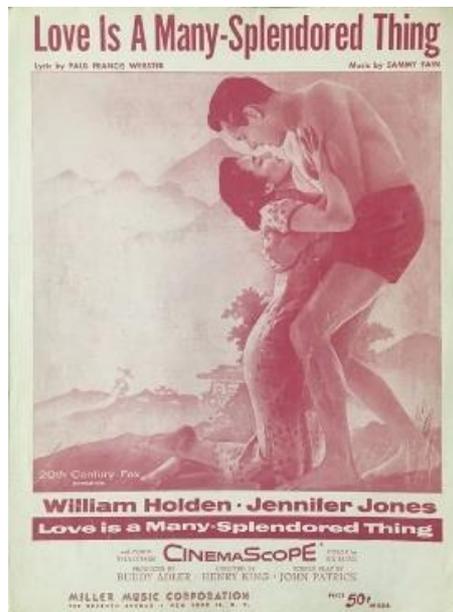
Despite their early setbacks, their marriage proved to be a great love-match, Irving’s reputation and success going from strength to strength, and Ellin proving not only to be a great support to Irving and their three daughters but also writing two successful novels. It was a marriage which was to last for 62 years, ending when Ellin predeceased her husband by just over a year in July 1988 at the age of 85, Irving dying in September 1989 at the age of 101. Irving had been too frail to attend her funeral. When earlier asked if she had married out her social order, she answered “Certainly - I married up”.

It had indeed been a romance where *...true love never did run smooth* but ultimately ‘*A Many Splendoured Thing!*’



**Irving and Ellin**

I will finish by returning to the film version of the novel “*Love Is A Many Splendoured Thing*”. The film starred Jennifer Jones and William Holden as the romantic leads, but an unromantic story lies behind their relationship. Though creating romantic chemistry onscreen, their personal relationship was hostile and all attempts to speak together in normal tones ended in dispute. Holden even tried to mend the relationship with a gift of roses, but these were thrown back in his face and Jones apparently chewed garlic before their more intimate onscreen encounters. So, when one sees the intense relationship portrayed convincingly onscreen, one can only admire the acting that veiled the off-screen toxic relationship that apparently was never mended.



Jim Stebbings  
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