

Une série noire

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gonne. Ce serait tout à l'honneur de M.B. Endrèbe, que l'on peut remercier de toute façon, pour ce joli roman anticonventionnel.

Voici mon autre trouvaille de la semaine, un ouvrage qui ne fut pas mentionné ici à sa parution, je crois. Il date de 1947, mais tout passe si vite dans le domaine du roman contemporain ! Il s'agit de «Joyeux, fais ton fourbi», de Julien Blanc. C'est un très beau livre, et basé entièrement sur un aspect particulier des mœurs homosexuelles. Le titre l'indique : les «joyeux» ce sont les soldats des bataillons disciplinaires nommés les Bat' d'Alf'. Le héros, condamné pour vol et désertion, est envoyé au Maroc dans un de ces camps presque concentrationnaires, où la brutalité, le sadisme, la lâcheté, le désespoir, ont libre cours. Mais, du fond de cette misère, peut naître quelquefois, et même chez les plus mauvais garçons, une étrange aspiration à la bonté, à la tendresse, au dévouement qui va jusqu'au sacrifice... Et cette renaissance de qualités humaines chez des êtres brisés, endurcis, n'est pas étrangère au fait que, privés de femmes, ces hommes doivent nécessairement s'organiser en couples; les plus faibles s'abritant sous l'autorité des plus forts, les plus forts devenant capables d'héroïsme pour protéger leur ami.

Etrangement, cette chronique cruelle, quelquefois pénible, d'un réalisme crû, devient un hymne à la grandeur de l'amour homosexuel, qui peut régénérer des êtres déchus, qui peut révéler à des brutes la tendresse et la fraternité nées d'un acte sexuel bestial.

Dan un tel milieu, l'homosexualité est considérée comme naturelle, légionnaires et gardiens la pratiquent également. Le style de Julien Blanc est, sur ce sujet, très réaliste, heureusement dénué de fausse pudeur, mais jamais vulgaire, et les scènes les plus précises sont traitées avec une délicatesse qui leur ôte tout ce qu'elles pourraient avoir de choquant. Ce style sans recherche littéraire arrive pourtant à une sorte de poésie par l'intérieur, c'est-à-dire inspirée par la tendresse humaine qui s'en dégage.

J'éprouvais une certaine méfiance pour ce livre avant de l'avoir lu, je craignais d'y trouver tous les poncifs qui ont fait le succès des films de Jean Gabin, genre «La Bandera», mais j'ai vite perdu mes préventions et je veux vous recommander ce livre qui, mieux que beau, est un «bon» livre.

R.G.D.

1) Collection «Nuits blanches», éditions Plon.

2) Editions du Pré aux Clercs.

Une série noire

par Scorpion

Il y a quelques jours, la police genevoise arrêtait un certain nombre d'individus qui s'étaient livrés à des actes que la morale réprovoque sur la personne de deux mineurs. La presse locale renseigna ses lecteurs avec un souci du détail qui lui est habituel

Un seul des accusés, Gilbert F., est accusé d'avoir eu des rapports avec les deux jeunes gens mineurs. Pour tous les autres, la victime est la

même. A noter que tous les prévenus sont célibataires, et qu'ils appartiennent à peu près à toutes les couches sociales de la population. Les faits reprochés sont très graves, mais sont tous reconnus, sauf en ce qui concerne Claude R., qui nie les faits s'étant déroulés à Genève, mais reconnaît ceux qui se sont passés à Lausanne.

Deux inspecteurs de la Sûreté viennent témoigner et déclarent que les faits, qui se déroulèrent en 1962, se passaient un peu partout, aussi bien aux domiciles des prévenus que dans des hôtels et des parcs publics. Ils ajoutent que, dans la plupart des cas, le mineur victime des neuf accusés a «sollicité» les accusés.

En raison de ce qui vient d'être exposé, il paraît difficile de croire en l'innocence des victimes, d'autant plus que les parents de l'un des deux jeunes gens en question étaient au courant de la conduite de leur enfant. L'insouciance de ces derniers, qui n'intervinrent que d'une façon peu convaincante, ne laisse pas de surprendre. Elle est directement responsable de ces malheureux événements. Pourtant, cette constatation ne suffit pas à justifier les 9 inculpés dont les noms, pour la plupart d'entre eux, ont été publiés in extenso par les journaux.

Ces incidents regrettables viennent s'ajouter à l'assassinat, demeuré inexplicable pendant plusieurs semaines, d'un fonctionnaire cubain, M. Fernando Alvarez.

On se souvient que celui-ci avait été découvert par la police, gisant sans vie et entièrement nu sur le seuil de son studio, situé 8, rue du Vidollet, le lundi 11 novembre vers 13 heures. La victime avait été tuée à coups de couteau portés sur la poitrine et dans le dos. Des flaques de sang étaient répandues autour du corps et sur les murs du petit appartement. Au milieu du studio, au pied d'une table, les enquêteurs avaient retrouvés deux verres — qui avaient contenu du whisky — qui gisaient à moitié brisés sur le sol. Le médecin-légiste avait établi que la mort remontait à la nuit précédente.

Plusieurs hypothèses

Dès le début de l'enquête, les policiers apprirent que la victime recevait assez fréquemment des hommes chez lui. On ne lui connaissait en revanche aucune liaison féminine. Les enquêteurs en déduisirent donc que M. Alvarez pouvait être de mœurs spéciales. Autre élément qui apparut rapidement dans l'enquête : la victime était farouchement anti-castriste. Il pouvait donc avoir des ennemis politiques. Enfin, dernière hypothèse que l'on pouvait formuler quant aux mobiles du crime : le vol pur et simple.

Après une enquête serrée au cours de laquelle près de 300 personnes ont été questionnées, la police genevoise a finalement mis la main sur le meurtrier. Il s'agit d'un ouvrier bernois, âgé de 18 ans et demi. Ainsi qu'on pouvait s'y attendre, nous nous trouvons en présence d'un crime crapuleux.

Les inspecteurs chargés de l'enquête purent déterminer que M. Alvarez avait passé la soirée du dimanche 10 novembre au cinéma Broadway, où était projeté le film «Désirs inavoués», qui relate la vie de Freud. Ce

film traitait précisément des refoulements sexuels d'une façon assez virulente. Il fut établi qu'après avoir vu cette bande, la victime paraissait quelque peu déprimée. Elle alla boire un café au «Bar-Dot», établissement situé à côté du cinéma. Elle voulut alors lier connaissance avec un employé du cinéma qui mit rapidement un terme à la conversation.

Dès cet instant, la trace de M. Alvarez disparaissait, son emploi du temps se perdait. Mais un autre élément important apparut bientôt : un habitant de la rue du Vidollet signala à la police que, durant la nuit de dimanche à lundi, il avait aperçu, vers 4 heures du matin, un jeune individu, grand et maigre et portant une veste de cuir, rôder autour de la voiture de la victime qui stationnait devant son immeuble.

Après de longues recherches, la police réussit à mettre la main sur cet inconnu qui ne devait pas tarder à avouer être le meurtrier du Cubain.

Les aveux du meurtrier . . .

Voici quels sont ses premiers aveux : Vers minuit quinze, alors qu'il déambulait sur le quai du Mont-Blanc, il fut accosté par sa future victime — se trouvant au volant de son auto — qui lui demanda l'heure. Prétexte fallacieux, puisque M. Alvarez revint bientôt vers lui pour lui dire que l'heure qu'il lui avait indiquée lui semblait fausse, car elle ne correspondait pas avec celle de sa montre, etc.

— *qu'Alvarez aurait invité à venir boire un verre chez lui*

Quelques secondes plus tard on avait sympathisé et M. Alvarez proposa à sa nouvelle connaissance d'aller boire un verre. Les cafés fermant à ce moment-là, le Cubain suggéra à cet individu d'aller prendre cette consommation chez lui. L'invitation fut acceptée. Il semble alors que M. Alvarez ne se soit pas contenté d'offrir à boire. Il lui fit également des «propositions» que l'autre accepta.

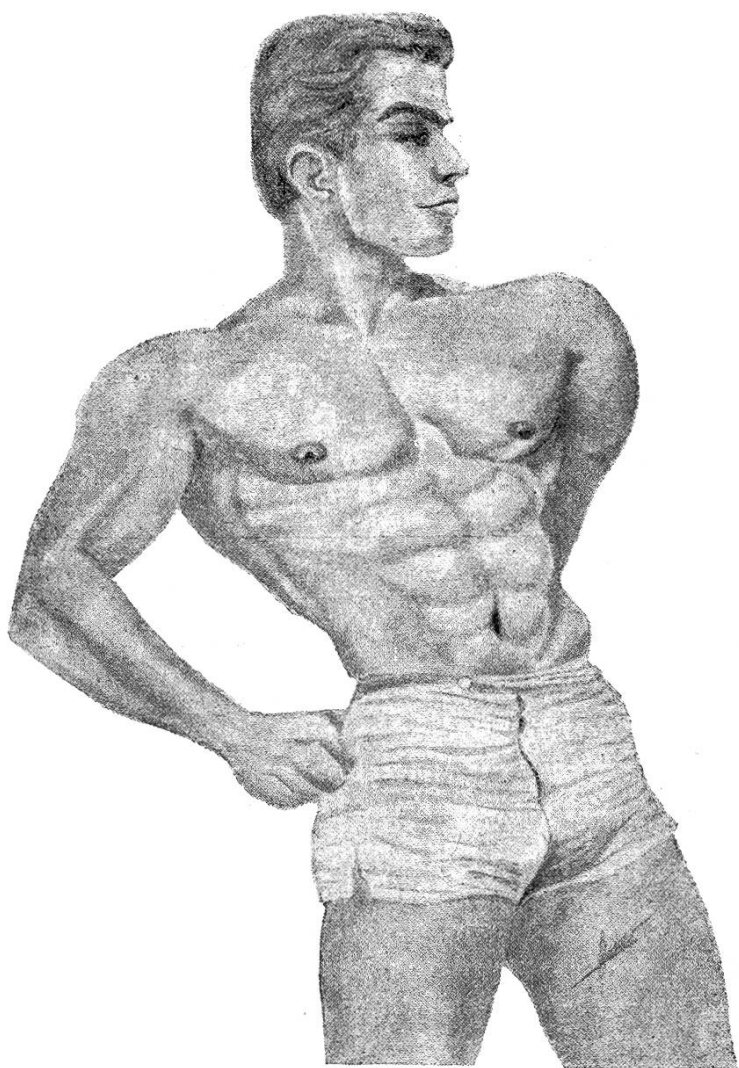
Il s'enfuit avec l'argent de la victime

Un peu plus tard, le jeune individu, armé de son couteau, se jeta soudain sur M. Alvarez en profitant de son sommeil. Mais la victime se réveilla dès que son agresseur l'eût touché et une courte lutte s'ensuivit. Devenu enragé, le meurtrier s'acharna sur son «ami de rencontre» qu'il blessa mortellement. Il s'enfuit ensuite en emportant de l'argent volé à sa victime.

Cette fin lamentable devrait servir d'avertissement à tous ceux d'entre nous qui se laissent aller à inviter chez eux n'importe quel inconnu de rencontre. Monsieur Fernando Alvarez — comme tant d'autres dans son cas — a payé très cher son imprudence. Les circonstances de sa mort peuvent soulever une indignation justifiée dans nos milieux. Mais, en même temps, elles contribuent à entretenir chez les autres des sentiments de répugnance et de mépris dont nous faisons tous les frais. Il n'est besoin que de lire, pour s'en convaincre, certains passages publiés par la presse :

Il y avait en lui, d'une part, l'homme intègre, le fonctionnaire intelligent jouissant de la sympathie des milieux internationaux qu'il fréquentait de façon régulière, et, d'autre part, l'homme qui avait des penchants cachés pour l'homosexualité. C'est donc dans ce sens que les enquêteurs poursuivirent leurs investigations.

Ainsi se trouve établie une distinction très nette entre les appétits sexuels d'un individu et les qualités intellectuelles de celui-ci. Critère dont il est facile de dénoncer l'extrême fragilité. Il n'empêche que cette opinion est celle d'une majorité de laquelle nous ne saurions attendre beaucoup de sympathie. Car la compréhension la plus élémentaire nous sera refusée aussi longtemps que nous multiplierons les erreurs grossières qui servent de pâture quotidienne à la presse locale.



*Dessin
d'un camarade
suisse-romand*

The alarm-clock shrilled in the darkness of the winter's morning, rendering the dream grotesque and then shattering it altogether. Kenneth Hamilton reached out a sleepy arm and stilled it. Half past five. Five hours since they had turned out the light and it seemed more like five minutes. He yawned, stretched, and kissed the upturned face on the other pillow. «You awake?»

«Ooooooh. Ahhhhh. Wassa time?»

«Just gone half past five.»

«Half past f i v e ?»

«Yes, we thought we'd set it half an hour earlier; remember?» His arms found their way around the slight figure, hugging it to him. «Oh, Leslie!»

Leslie gently resisted him. «Darling, I'm sorry, but I . . .»

Hamilton almost succeeded in preventing himself from stiffening. Leslie's voice was wheedling. «Darling, you're not mad at me? I feel awful about it, specially just now. I'll make it up to you when you come home, honestly I will!»

«Never mind.» A sigh was the only indication Hamilton gave of the bitter tide of disappointment and misgiving that was swirling through him. To set out is to die a little, said the French, but setting out was becoming increasingly mortal. He dreaded the hysterical demonstrations of grief that took all the pleasure out of embarkation, and it was against one of these he had been steeling himself; the rebuff had struck him in an undefended quarter.

«Darling, you are mad at me. Oh, if only you didn't have to go away! I hate to think of you out there, tossing about in that beastly old ship . . .» Leslie was off again, with the same hackneyed protestations, the same futile arguments, the same vague accusations in monotonous round; each had been answered in full so often that there was no point in punctuating the recital with anything more than acquiescent noises.

Although purists might contend that his branch was not of the stuff of which sailors are made, the sea had long ago claimed Hamilton for her own. A member of a family with no seafaring tradition, he had joined the R.N.V.R. straight from school. The only vacancies at the time were for cooks and writers, so he had chosen to be a writer. He left the Navy when the war finished, wanting only to escape from its uncomfortable ships and harsh discipline. He drifted from job to job, finding his new freedom somehow empty, then one day he had run into a former shipmate who had joined the Merchant Service and found it good. A month later he was at sea again. He was a purser now, with a uniform, his own cabin, his own set of responsibilities, enough discipline to keep him up to the mark, and yet not too much of it. There were so few of the disadvantages of

navy life, and so many of the attractions: the all-male community and the feeling of being part of it, the sense of forward movement a ship gives to those who sail in her, the adventure of setting out and the joy of coming home, the fascination of the sea in its many moods, and the very real lure of faraway places. He had heard work defined as what you did when you'd rather be doing something else, but if that were the case he'd been drawing his salary under false pretences as he'd never really worked at all! There simply was nothing else he'd rather be doing, no job outside the present one in which he could even remotely picture himself. Memories of getting up early, crowding into a train, joining in the fatuous chorus of 'good mornings', putting up with the office staff (and oh, those bloody girls!), getting into the train again—same old treadmill, one revolution per day—seemed like the vague recollections of a fantastic nightmare.

Ah, yes, but life was never as simple as that. Along with his devotion to the sea, Hamilton had a longing for a home and a companion to share it. Had he been heterosexual he would no doubt have found a wife among the women who have loved and wedded England's seafarers down the centuries. The owners would have allowed her to accompany him on coastwise trips, sharing the double bunk considerably provided in his cabin. But when one's nature does not permit the conventional alliance one is denied these concessions, and time with the loved one is proportionately cut down. Leslie was sensible enough in other ways, but completely unreasonable in his attitude to seafaring, regarding it as little worse than a waywardness when being indulgent, but more often as a deliberate and selfish cruelty: it was all right for 'Darling' to be sailing along in his ship, with a different sailor in his bunk every night, presumably, but what of poor lonely Leslie, pining and forsaken at home? He must be somewhere about this point now, Hamilton thought. I'm afraid it will break up our partnership sooner or later, but I see no help for it. It was like a mixed marriage; we never stopped to consider that it carried the seeds of its own destruction, we were so headlong in love, weren't we—and I still am! Why can't you see that my sea life and my home life are as divergent and yet as much a part of me as my two legs: tie them together and I'm hobbled, cut either of them off and I'm crippled. Aloud he said: «Well, it's nearly six, I must be getting up.»

Sick at heart, he dragged himself out of bed, lit the gas-fire and put the kettle on for tea.

A weeping mist shrouded the silent street as Hamilton waited at the bus stop under the hazy moon of the street lamp. It would be better to spend the last night aboard and save this early-morning scramble when there were engine trials. Getting up before seven was always a bad start to a day anyhow, it just wasn't civilised. Next docking, perhaps, he would go back aboard about midnight, having got all the hysterics over with, and take a sleeping-pill before turning in. If there were a next time . . . But not yet. O Lord, not yet!

They had never taken the ultimate step of closing Leslie's room altogether, although he lived at the flat when Hamilton was in residence, and to judge by the gas and electricity bills spent a good deal of time there while he was away. This was welcome enough as it kept the place aired and more or less occupied; he had several times been on the point of suggesting that Leslie move in permanently but had somehow drawn back, a minor conflict within the major one. How wonderful if life were only uncomplicated by the demands of love!

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The day's work pushed such problems into the background, but they reared up afresh with the news that all was not well below and the ship would have to go back to the dockyard. A reprieve—or was it merely a sentence to further punishment, depending upon how you looked at it?

He went up to the wireless office where the lord of that small domain was sitting with headphones around his neck, reading a newspaper.

«Hallo, Ken.»

«Hallo, Wally. Still on watch?»

«Not officially, but I'm expecting an answer to the Super's telegram so I'm just keeping an ear out. Why they don't fit VHF or bring one with them on trials I don't know.»

«What time are we due back?» Ken seated himself on the desk.

«About half past six. Going home?»

«Mmm, I suppose I'd better. How long is this going to take?»

«If they work all night they'll be ready for another seven-thirty getaway. Is he being difficult again?»

Ken nodded. «Oh, Wally, it's killing me! It's getting so bad that I dread leaving so much I hardly want to come home. Then when I've finally torn myself away, feeling like a murderer, it takes me most of the voyage to get over it, and by that time I'm on the down-grade as we're on our way home again!»

«Poor old Kenny!» Wally's hand closed for a moment over his, and his eyes were full of sympathy. «With the luck you have in love, you ought to take up gambling, you'd soon be a millionaire! It's a shame the way they treat you, first that kick in the balls you got in Japan and now this bloke trying to shove the anchor down your throat. They don't realise what a bargain they're getting. If I were that way inclined I'd have teamed up with you myself, over their dead bodies if necessary!»

Ken was touched. It had once been necessary to confide in a third party during a period of some unpleasantness and he had taken his courage in hand and unmasked himself to Wally, who had accepted the fact without flinching. When Wally's wife came coasting they exchanged cabins as the company had apparently wished to encourage celibacy among its telegraphic staff when installing their bunks. When, three years previously, his castle of dreams had come crashing about his ears as they left Japan, it was to Wally he unburdened himself. He returned the grip briefly. «I've often wished you were», he confessed. «Purely in that vague, theoretical sort of way you might wish you could change places with somebody, that is. I'd like to have somebody like you for a lover, but the nearer the ideal, the harder to find!»

«I take that as a compliment!» Wally laughed good-naturedly. «But supposing you do find him, what then?»

Ken sighed. «What's one more straw on the camel's back? I'm not complaining of any lack of devotion in Leslie, mind you, if anything there's a surfeit of it. If I were to leave him for someone else I think he'd go round the bend. And if I weren't the same way over him I doubt if I'd put up with what I do! I'm afraid it's a bit late now.»

«Now, don't think me a cynic, old man, but this, too, will pass. I was engaged to a girl once who wore me to a frazzle in exactly the same way. I was in the same state as you are now and it was killing me, too. Then we had a tiff over some trifle and before we knew what was happening it was all over, just like one cigarette-butt can burn out a whole ship. I think we'd been bound together more by hate than by love. Then I met Grace, and proposed to her inside twenty-four hours, before somebody else did! People say there's no love at first sight, and could well be so. But it's possible for two people to recognise in each other all the requirements, and trust to their judgment that love will come later. I was with the Marconi Company then, and not home regularly like we are here; she knew what she was letting herself in for and has never complained or tried to alter things in any way, and the rest is history. Ken, you can't keep an affair going at incandescent heat without burning up either the parties concerned or the affair itself. When did this one start?»

«Second voyage after we flew home from Japan.»

«That'll be three years in Spring, say a bit over two years...» his voice trailed into silence as he pursued his own thoughts. Suddenly he looked up. «I

know just the man for you! I couldn't think why he seemed so familiar at the time, but it was because he reminded me so much of you, of course. I wouldn't have said he was queer, but I wouldn't have thought you were, either, if you hadn't told me yourself. I reckon he's one of those hard-to-find ones you were talking about!»

«No, don't tell me, Wally. Perhaps another straw might be the last.»

«All right. But you're bound to meet him, I don't see how you can possibly— Just a minute.» He snapped a switch and made an entry in his log, took a message-pad from the drawer and put his headphones on. He snapped another switch and there was a whirr from the transmitter as he worked the key and began taking the message.

«Well, that's that», Wally said as with a final flourish on the key he switched off the transmitter. «Look where we're berthing!» He handed Ken the form. «I'll send one to Grace when I've delivered this and she'll pick us up in the car.»

*

«Will a quarter to seven suit you?» Grace asked as she drew up at the corner of the street.

Ken hesitated. The old feeling of apprehension came back, kneading his intestines to a heavy dough. It went away when he was with them. The easy security of their relationship made him, too, feel secure; they had love to spare and the overflow was like balm to him. It was the contrast when he left them that daunted him so; when he had been over East the grimness of Communist China was never so starkly apparent as when they had just come from smiling Japan. «Oh. I don't know, Grace; I may go back to-night instead», he said uncertainly.

«Ken's having a bit of domestic trouble», Wally said.

«Ken, dear, I'm terribly sorry!» Grace turned around in her seat. «Look, we'll be here at a quarter to seven on the dot and we'll look out for you, and if you're not here we'll go on. All right?»

Ken nodded. He felt his composure fraying and couldn't trust himself with words. He got out of the car. «Good-night.»

«Take it easy, old man, and best of luck.» Wally gave his arm a fraternal squeeze as the car moved off.

The street was dark and cold and empty, and Ken felt a similar desolation within. If he could have gone home with those two . . . He pushed the thought back where it came from and dismissed the spectre of an ageing bachelor eking out a solitary existence with visits to other people's firesides. The question of the moment was whether to spend the evening in the flat alone, to go around and fetch Leslie, or perhaps to have a few hours with him there and go back around midnight and not bring him to the flat at all.

The question was settled by his finding when he came to the house that the light in his living-room was on. His wretchedness fell from him, there was the familiar, tingling warmth and he felt the beating of his heart as he ascended the stairs. Now the key was in the lock, now the door was open and there was Les—. But it wasn't Leslie who was asleep in the big armchair. Kent's mind harked back to the night when staying with his sister in a new housing settlement he had come with one too many under the belt and was frying himself some eggs when a strange man in a dressing-gown had appeared at the kitchen door and said that having gone to all that trouble he might as well stay and eat them, but in future would he please have a better look at the house numbers.

He studied the visitor as he lay comfortably back in the chair in front of the gas, the wireless on the Home Service, where he usually had it himself (until Leslie would change it to the Light Programme; but he was putting out feelers for a television now). He was struck by the uncanny rightness of the man for the surroundings, he might almost have been selected with the furniture. He would have been in his late thirties and his black curly hair was shot here

and there with grey. His features had a Scottish cast to them. It was in every way a man's face; more than that, it was a seaman's face, strong and evenly tanned, and there on the bed, neatly folded, was the tell-tale blue Burberry. By the bed was a little overnight bag.

What does one do, or say, upon finding an obviously civilised stranger confidently asleep in one's favourite chair? Hardly call the police when an inner voice is insisting that one would like him immensely if he were awake. Suit the word to the music, perhaps, and say: 'Aimez-vous Brahms?' A sudden draught took matters out of his hands as the door slammed and the man woke up. He yawned and stretched luxuriously, smiled sleepily and said: «Is that you, dear? I must have dropped off to sleep!» Then he opened his eyes and saw Ken.

He gave a little start and sat up. «Oh, did I leave the door open?» He rose to his feet. «You're after Mr. Lazenby, are you? He's working this evening but they're only dressing the one window, he shouldn't be long. Do sit down, take off your things.»

He spoke with the gracious manner of one used to authority and Ken found himself ridiculously obeying, and realised he hadn't even put down his bag. «Excuse me», he said, «but just who are you, and what exactly are you doing here?» The question was only partly meant. Sickeningly, he knew what the man was doing there, but when lightning strikes a second time in the same place there is little more damage it can do.

«My name's Kerr—Horace Kerr», the answer had a touch of defiance in it, «sorry about the first name, but it was given to me when I was in no state to refuse it. And I'm here at the invitation of the owner of the flat. Any further questions?»

«Pleased to meet you», Ken rallied his forces as he held out his hand to check his estimate of the other's grip. «I'm Kenneth Hamilton—and this happens to be my flat.»

«Your flat?»

«Well, if you want to split straws, I pay the rent, and the wireless licence, and some pretty decent gas bills in my absence.» The barb went home and he could have kicked himself for making the last remark.

«But I don't understand. You *are* in the right flat, I take it. Do you know Leslie Lazenby?»

«Yes, I know him.» Better than I used to, Ken added bitterly to himself.

«Well, where does he come into this? He and I are...» Kerr looked him in the eyes, «rather good friends. I'm a seaman, as you may have gathered, and I've been visiting him in this flat for the past eighteen months and he has certainly led me to believe it was his. Do you sub-let to him, then?»

What confidence, what unshakable trust! His rival had obviously never been through the mill before or he'd have tumbled to it by now. His hatred for Leslie was matched only by an overwhelming compassion for the man who stood on the hearthrug before him. «Horace», he said gently, «sit down.»

To have to smash a friendly person's world into smithereens is bad enough, but to have to watch a serene and happy face crumple into a haggard ruin is beyond endurance. «I'm sorry, Horace», he finished, «but there it is. And believe me. I'd have given the world not to be the one who had to tell you.»

Horace stood up with an effort. «Thanks», he said shortly. «Well, as I had no claim on the actual owner, and have no further claim on the pretended one, there doesn't seem much point in my staying any longer, does there?» He gave a bitter laugh and went to pick up his coat. Suddenly he swayed dizzily and would have fallen had Ken not caught him and guided him back into the chair.

«You're in no shape to go yet», Ken said. «If this were France we'd no doubt have pistols at dawn, but I'll settle for poison right now. What'll it be?»

«That's better», said Horace, gazing into his glass. «I'm sorry I was so car-

ried away by my own petty trouble that I didn't even condole with you. It must have been a nasty shock for you to find me here!»

«It was a shock, but not altogether a nasty one. You looked so much a part of the surroundings I felt like an intruder! No, I've been through it all once before. This won't kill you, you know, but it kills a part of you, and where there's no sense there's no feeling. I suppose as we pass from hand to hand the shocks become progressively weaker until we end up in a state of general anaesthesia where we don't feel anything at all.»

«I can't imagine that ever happening to you, anyhow. But tell me about the other time, if it's not too painful. I feel as if I must get my bearings, as it were.»

«I was in a ship running to the Far East and got tangled up with a Japanese barman called Tadashi. I used to sit in his bar all the evening, talking to him and the bar-girls in appalling Japanese, and go home with him after they closed. I used to stay with him every time we were in port and he used to save up his days off; if we didn't go there I'd send him the fare to the nearest port and we'd have a little time together. Our final visit was an unexpectedly long one. One morning he told me his sister was very ill down in Shikoku and he must go to her bedside. I gave him the fare and went back to the ship, but the same morning we were given our marching orders and I had to leave next day. I went back to his room to collect my kit and found everything of mine stowed away and all manner of knick-knacks dotted about belonging to somebody else. I rang up his bar and he answered the telephone. He was there all the time. I hung up without saying anything and never saw him again. I took away my things and spent my last night in Japan with a bar-boy I'd been friendly with before I met him.»

«What was he like?»

«It's hard to say, as he was essentially a character actor. I think his natural role would have been that of a hard-headed businessman. I've seen him shriek with terror and subside quivering into the arms of a big Swede he was with when a cockroach walked across the bar—I wished the Swede could have seen him the night he and I were attacked by a Korean with a knife: He threw the man with a Japanese tackle and jumped on his chest and kicked him in the skull without turning a hair. In bed he was a combination of an octopus, an all-in wrestler and a long-distance runner; I left him because I couldn't stand the pace. And then that last night he was so loving and gentle . . . I've seen him squeezing money out of Americans like milk out of a cow, and yet that night I offered him fifty thousand yen I'd been going to leave as a parting gift to my late doxy and he wouldn't take it. (I did persuade him to take ten). I've heard that he's invested his earnings and spends his day at the stockbroker's, not bad for a bar-boy!»

«I really meant the other one, Tadashi, what was he like?»

«Let me see. He was slightly built and sweet-faced, and there was a sort of innocence about him. He never asked for anything, but had a way of getting it out of you without actually doing so. He had a touch of femininity, without being in any way effeminate. I think pliant would be the best word to describe him. He was inclined to be helpless and clinging; he would go into transports of joy on my arrival and would be so downcast when I left that it hurt me to go. He was always on about having no friends and being so terribly lonely when I was away. I never thought he had a great deal of character, but respected him for being a battler and did what I could to make his life more pleasant. He had very winning ways, which more than made up for his not being very good in bed and for Nature's niggardliness towards him. Let me get you another.»

He went into the kitchenette and at that moment the door opened and Leslie came bustling in, all smiles. «Hallo, darling, sorry to be so—» his smile died as Kerr's face set like granite and his piercing black eyes contracted to two pieces of flint. «Darling, whatever's the matter?» He stood transfixed, as following

Kerr's eyes he saw Hamilton standing in the doorway, the expression on his face making that on Kerr's look by comparison almost benign. «Our Mutual friend», he said humourlessly. «Have you anything to say for yourself?»

Apparently considering attack to be the best form of defence, Leslie had plenty to say. He was a man of few words, but used them over and over again. The others listened unmoved.

As the torrent of words fell to a trickle and petered out, Hamilton spoke. «I'd like my key back, please, to begin with.» He looked at his watch. «You have two minutes from now to collect anything that belongs to you, or any trivia you may have given me. If you ever set foot in this house again you'll be taking a risk, I assure—.» He threw up his hand and warded off the key, which Leslie flung in his face with all his might.

Kerr moved almost as swiftly and Leslie reeled under a shattering slap in the face. «How dare you!» Kerr said. «How *dare* you!» His right hand crashed down on the other cheek. «Get out.» He opened the door, ejected the whimpering Leslie and turned to his host, who was sucking his hand and thanking his lucky stars that Horace hadn't got violent with him. «How's the hand?»

«Better than the face, I reckon! He drew blood, though.»

«Wish I had. Jesus, he might have blinded you!»

«I could do with that other drink now!»

«You know», said Horace as they settled down again, «When you were describing Tadashi you could almost have been talking about Leslie except for the last item. Do you go for a certain type, then?»

Ken lay back and thought it over. «Not consciously, although now you come to mention it perhaps a person like that does enable me to assert my manliness and overlook my own shortcomings, and I suppose their insistence on my indispensability was flattering in a way. What do you think?»

«Could be. But after Leslie, would you still keep looking for Tadashi over again? Ken (may I call you Ken?)», he chose his words as if they were stepping-stones across a dangerous river, «wouldn't it be more practical to look for somebody more like yourself? You wouldn't have to assert your manliness with somebody who took it for granted, and overlooked your shortcomings as you might overlook his. And you'd know you were indispensable without its being harped upon, perhaps even because he was becoming indispensable to you.»

Ken would have gone to rescue the figure balancing in mid-stream, but found himself also in deep water. A sudden recognition flashed upon him. «Do you know a man by the name of Wally Barnes?»

«Fancy your knowing him! Yes, he was with us last voyage. It was my first trip with my present company and he was a mine of information, as well as being a very efficient R/O.»

«Then we're in the same company!»

They had never got past names, of course, and the circumstances of their introduction had been hardly conducive to taking things further. Horace related rather ruefully how he had given up a command to join Ken's company as a mate so he could be nearer Leslie, and now . . .

Ken felt a little glow of affection towards Wally, whose intuition had been as sound as his intentions had been good. But already their talk seemed to belong somewhere back in another existence. He took Horace's glass. «I see you've got your gear with you», he said. «Would you like to stay the night?»

«I hardly like to, thanks all the same», Horace's tone was losing its sparkle again. «I'm horribly afraid I shall cry like a fool when I take my mental corsets off. And we're both so badly hurt we don't know what we're saying. Do you think it's wise?»

Was it, indeed? But this was no time for caution; it was almost as if Wally had given him a little push forward. It wasn't love at first sight, that was

plain, but equally plain was that there existed the foundations to build upon. Let the waters run dangerously and deep, they would brave them together. «And what do you think I shall be doing as soon as the light's out? Don't you think *we* could overlook each other's shortcomings, and begin by offering each other some comfort?»

«Begin?»

Their eyes met, and held.

«Yes.»

*

The alarm-clock shrilled in the winter darkness. Ken switched it off. They had turned out the light at eleven, but had lain there talking, nothing more, until they had drifted away into sleep; he couldn't remember when that was. He yawned, stretched, and looked down into the upturned face on the other pillow; then, on an impulse, kissed it. «You awake?»

«Hallo.» A pair of strong arms closed around him.

It was tough luck that separation should follow so closely upon their meeting, but that was part of the sailor's heritage. They would sail together before very long, anyhow, for even without any string-pulling the alternatives in a small company were limited. The future looked as bright and as boundless as a summer sea.

«Well, it's gone six, I must be getting up. I'll bring you some tea soon. Grace's picking me up at a quarter to seven, but there's no need for you to get up yet.»

«I will, though. Besides wanting to see the ship and say 'hallo' to Wally, I want to see the look on his face when he sees us together!»

«Fair enough», said Ken, then murmured, half to himself, «I shall be quite content just to let him see the look on mine!»

With a happy heart, he sprang out of bed, lit the gas and put the kettle on.

L y c i a s

'Tis a soft Rogue, this Lycias
And rightly understood,
He's worth a thousand Women's Niceness!
The Love of Women moves even with their Lust,
Who therefore still are fond, but seldom just;
Their Love is Usury, while they pretend,
To gain the Pleasure double which they lend.
But a dear Boy's disinterested Flame
Gives Pleasure, and for meet Love gathers Pain;
In him alone Fondness sincere does prove,
And the kind tender Naked Boy is Love.

(From «*Valentinian*» by Rochester, 1648-80.)

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