## The Great Trespass.

Brooke Jarvis | July 30, 2023 | NYTMag

*Brooke Jarvis is a contributing writer for the magazine. She last wrote a feature about droughts and floods in California. Muir Vidler is a photographer based in London and Edinburgh. His portraits include images of Ai Weiwei, Molly Goddard and Stephen Hawking.*

The signs on the gate at the entrance to the path and along the edge of the reservoir were clear. ''No swimming,'' they warned, white letters on a red background.

On a chill mid-April day in northwest England, with low, gray clouds and rain in the forecast, the signs hardly seemed necessary. But then people began arriving, by the dozens and then the hundreds. Some walked only from nearby Hayfield, while others came by train or bus or foot from many hours away. In a long, trailing line, they tramped up the hill beside the dam and around the shore of the reservoir, slipping in mud and jumping over puddles. Above them rose a long, curving hill of open moorland, its heather still winter brown. When they came to a gap between a stone wall and a metal fence, they squeezed through it, one by one, slipping under strings of barbed wire toward the water below.

On the steep grassy bank above the reservoir, coats and sweaters came off, revealing wet suits and swimsuits. Thermoses of tea and hot chocolate were readied for quick access; someone had brought along a banged-up trumpet with which to provide the appropriate fanfare. There were seasoned winter swimmers, people who had stories of breaking through ice for a dip, and complete newbies, deciding as they shivered whether this particular symbolic act was really for them. There was a 7-year-old who swam in a knit beanie with a purple pom-pom and a man with a Yorkshire accent who told his wife, in mock horror, ''I had to ask a strange woman to zip me up, Mary!''

Down on the shore, giggling and shrieking people picked their way across slippery rocks. Then, with a great deal of cheering and splashing, they took to the water en masse, fanning out in all directions. Some carried a large banner that read, ''The Right to Swim.''

The water was somewhere around 50 degrees Fahrenheit, but it felt, a 61-year-old swimmer announced after climbing out and wrapping up again, ''bloody wonderful.'' She handed her sister a Cheddar-and-Branston-Pickle sandwich and told me she usually hates encountering crowds when they go swimming but that this one was delightful.

More rounds of cheers went up as new waves of swimmers splashed into the water. An older woman wearing a pink floral swimsuit paused on the shore to turn to the crowd still on land. ''Don't be beaten down!'' she shouted, raising a fist above her flower-bedecked bathing cap. ''Rebel!'' Then she, too, flopped into the lake.

On the bank above the reservoir, a choir serenaded the swimmers:

''He said 'All this land is my master's,'at that I stood shaking my headNo man has the right to own mountains,any more than the deep ocean bed.''

The song, by the folk singer Ewan McColl, was about another mass trespass, one that took place 91 years earlier above this very reservoir, during which protesters were arrested for daring to walk on hills they were told to keep off. Over the decades that followed, the protesters' contention that people had some inherent rights of access even to lands they did not own -- which in England is most land, because the vast majority of the country is in private hands -- was enshrined in law, guaranteeing public access to this and many other parts of the countryside.

Lately, though, the swimmers told me, those hard-won gains had begun to seem both less expansive and less secure than they once imagined. During the pandemic, many took up open-water swimming or paddling or walking, only to be surprised at the number of places they weren't allowed to go. (The reservoir, owned by a private utility company even though it is inside the Peak District National Park, was one such place: England's national parks are full of land that is privately owned -- and inhabited, farmed, mined and hunted.) The government began to push to criminalize forms of trespass never before considered to be crimes. Then, in January, the High Court sided with a wealthy couple who wanted to keep the public from camping on an estate they bought inside Dartmoor National Park, in an area called the Commons, the only place in England where wild camping, what we would call backpacking, was still considered a right. Robert Macfarlane, the English nature writer, called the ruling a nationwide wake-up call: Only when ''the last relic of a long-lost openness'' was threatened did it become clear just how much was at stake.

Like the trespassers whose anniversary they were commemorating, the swimmers believed they were fighting for something bigger than the chance to walk up a hill or swim in a river -- something fundamental about their relationship to the land where they lived.

''It's not so much that we need to be granted permission,'' explained a woman with long gray hair and a sweatshirt that read, ''Kayaking Is Not a Crime.'' ''It's that we need it to be recognized that we don't need permission.''

Centuries ago, high moors like those of Kinder Scout, the plateau that stretched above the reservoir, were considered King's Land, uncultivated areas to which access was free. In the villages below, land was often claimed by the aristocracy and gentry, who collected taxes from the peasants who worked it, but many villagers, called commoners, held shared rights to ''common'' land, where they could graze their animals or plant crops or gather firewood.

This type of land disappeared rapidly during the enclosure movement of the 18th and 19th centuries, when the wealthy claimed wild and common lands -- lands that, as the jurist William Blackstone put it, previously belonged ''generally to everybody, but particularly to nobody'' -- as their own. The movement leaned on the work of philosophers such as John Locke, who argued that people could gain ownership of ''waste'' lands by working and improving them. But there were others who believed that separating people from the land was a gross injustice. ''What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors, would the human race have been spared,'' wrote Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ''by someone who, pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had cried out to his fellow humans: 'Beware of listening to this impostor. You are lost if you forget that the fruits are everyone's and the earth's is no one's!'''

As enclosure spread, many former users of the land were pushed out. With no way to make a living, they drifted to cities. Kinder is not far from Manchester and Sheffield, two early centers of the Industrial Revolution, whose residents liked to escape the choking air by going on long walks in the countryside. But many of the landowners who controlled the hills weren't fond of having walkers, known as ramblers, exploring properties they used for raising sheep and hunting grouse. They hired armies of gamekeepers, who sometimes used attack dogs, to kick the ramblers out.

Some ramblers, in their city lives, were involved in trade unions and other labor movements, and they began to bring the same spirit of organization and protest to their weekend walks. (As the most shoutable line of the McColl song has it, ''I may be a wage slave on Monday/But I am a free man on Sunday!'') The land they were walking might be private property, they argued, but its owners weren't the only ones with the right to use it: English law acknowledges that a right can be established through long custom, and the walkers were following ancient paths and bridle ways onto upland that had only recently been privatized.

Some walkers began holding rallies and undertaking purposeful trespasses in places where they knew they would be ejected. This had been going on for decades when, in April 1932, a rambler named Benny Rothman alerted the press that he and others would be heading up past the reservoir to the plateau above it, an area owned by the Duke of Devonshire. Hundreds of ramblers tussled with keepers, making national headlines. Six were arrested and five sentenced to as much as six months in jail.

At the time, England was home to a number of groups working to protect commons, parks and walking trails as part of what the campaigner Octavia Hill, at an 1888 meeting of what eventually became the Open Spaces Society (O.S.S.), called ''a common possession we ought to try to hand down undiminished in number and in beauty.'' Most saw the trespassers' actions as counterproductive. Eventually, however, the Kinder Trespass became what the O.S.S. now calls ''a sacred event in rambling circles,'' and its leaders' beliefs were more widely embraced. Beginning in the 1940s, Parliament began to codify the idea that people had an inherent right to move across the landscape, culminating in the Countryside Rights of Way (CROW) Act, in 2000. The act recognized the right not only to use designated paths but also to roam freely on certain mountains, moors, heaths and downs mapped as ''open country'' or on land registered as common. In 2009, the Marine and Coastal Access Act designated the shore as access land as well and promised an additional 2,700 miles of coastal footpaths.

Today there are about 140,000 miles of legally protected paths in England, and the countryside is full of signs marking public footpaths or rights of way. I found them leading past fields of rapeseed or sheep, along a creek that flowed behind the walls of private gardens, through woods to a country pub. The first time I encountered such a sign, it marked a charming little trail leading over a brook at the end of the lane where I was staying in Little Hayfield. I had other plans for the morning and only meant to take a tiny walk, but suddenly I couldn't help myself: Having grown up in rural Tennessee, where the ''No Trespassing'' signs were so ubiquitous as to hardly be necessary, I was overcome by the mere fact of permission. Here was a path, to who knew where, on which I was decidedly welcome -- not just welcome, in fact, but entitled. It would have felt almost disrespectful to ignore it.

To an American, traversing the land in rural England can feel a bit like looking in a fun-house mirror -- a system just different enough that it forces you to see your own expectations in a new way. Some of the people I met in England had heard that the United States has a lot of public land, which is true. But access to it depends a lot on where you live; nearly all federal land is in just 11 Western states and Alaska. (And even there, the courts are still working out what ''public'' really means, mulling, for example, when anglers are allowed to walk on public streambeds that run through private property or whether hunters can cross ''private airspace'' by using a ladder to get from one checkerboard square of public land to another.) Others had heard that the United States is a warren of private lands, governed by threatening signs and stand-your-ground laws: The week of the swim trespass, the news back home was full of stories of people being shot after accidentally driving up the wrong driveway or knocking on the wrong door. Kate Rew, the founder of England's Outdoor Swimming Society, remembered with shock when she arrived at the Pacific, eager to swim, but couldn't find a beach that wasn't private property. Another activist, Owen Hayman, told some friends he was visiting in Montana that he was headed out for a walk and was surprised when they replied that they would first need to drive him somewhere. A farmer I met in Gloucestershire, who thought the English already had plenty of access to his land, nonetheless seemed to sympathize with my plight as an American: ''You can't go anywhere, can you?''

After following that first right-of-way sign, I stumbled on a spring full of plump tadpoles and followed a red-striped bumblebee from flower to flower. I thought about how nice the word ''ramble'' was, how it evoked wandering and whimsy and openness instead of the determined, point-to-point rush of the American ''hike.'' I navigated a brief standoff with a pair of rams, soaked my feet in a boggy cow pasture and skirted private houses. One resident nodded politely from behind a sign, ''Please respect our privacy,'' that I liked rather better than the sign one of my mother's neighbors in the United States displays on her mailbox: ''If you can read this, you're in range.''

I emerged at the top of a hill called Lantern Pike, said to have gotten its name because it once served as a place to light beacon fires. In one direction, I could see the buildings of Manchester, and in the other, the long brown line of Kinder Scout, notched in the middle where a waterfall tumbles down. Below it were fields of bright green pasture squared in by dark stone walls.

A little over a decade ago, a young illustrator named Nick Hayes was staying with his parents in West Berkshire, not far from London, while he worked on a graphic novel. One day, walking near a lightning-struck willow, he spotted a kingfisher, the first he ever saw. He hoped to show it to his mother, but as they approached the tree, a man on a four-wheeler raced over, announcing: ''You've no right to be here. You're trespassing.''

The pair immediately turned around. Hayes walked home, struck by the power of that single word. He typed ''trespass'' into a search engine, surprised to learn that his actions were merely a civil offense, typically punishable only in the case of property damage, and that trespass hadn't always been considered an offense at all. The more he read, the more Hayes began to believe that the building of a wall, not the climbing of it, was the bigger crime. He began working on a book about what he was learning, taking himself on small trespasses around the country, climbing over the walls of large estates or slipping past them by kayak. Sometimes there was shouting, sometimes threats. Everywhere he found reminders of a long, ever-evolving relationship with the land. It was in the land use (the fox hunts and deer parks of the wealthy) and in the literature (all that wide-open walking in Tolkien and Wordsworth) and in the language: ''Beyond the pale'' originates from the Middle English word for fence, and acre comes from the Old English for ''open field,'' though the word eventually stopped meaning unoccupied land and came to define standardized measures by which land could be bought and sold.

''You can chuck a stone in England, and there's a story of land dispossession wherever it lands,'' Hayes told me when I first spoke to him last year. Fencing people off from nature, he believed, caused each to suffer: People felt bereft and disconnected, and problems like pollution or biodiversity loss became less visible, harder to care about. Hayes became convinced that society put too much emphasis on the sacredness of private property and the accompanying threat of trespass. Kinder Trespass was evidence of that: ''To cheer a man for walking through heather and likewise to beat him up for it are both absurdly disproportionate to the act itself,'' he wrote. ''But inside the logic of the bubble, such an act is tantamount to anarchy, because it threatens the spell.''

In this context, even the CROW Act began to look less like a victory for the public and more like a consolation prize that disguised how much had already been lost.

The right of way officially applies only to movement; paths are for walking (and bridle ways for riding), not for camping or picnicking or drawing or hula-hooping. Paths and access land are concentrated in the least populated rural regions and are scarce where most people live. Many protected areas are difficult to navigate. (People who spend time in the countryside rely on detailed maps from the government to figure out where they are or aren't allowed to walk. Echoing their military heritage, they're called O.S., or Ordnance Survey, maps.) Some places offer no real access, because they are islands floating in a sea of private property -- you would need a helicopter or a parachute to get to them -- while others require constant vigilance to keep open. In one famous case, a company associated with the tycoon Nicholas van Hoogstraten, who was known for his involvement in the killing of a business rival and once referred to ramblers as ''scum of the Earth,'' erected buildings and fences that blocked a protected right of way in East Sussex. The path was closed for 13 years before Hoogstraten lost in court and Kate Ashbrook, a former chairwoman of the Ramblers and now general secretary of the O.S.S., reopened the path by taking a pair of bolt cutters to a padlocked gate.

The CROW Act was also time-limited; there is likely less than a decade left during which new access paths can be certified. But the process for adding them is byzantine. To certify a right of way, you have to prove that you've never asked a landowner for permission to walk there (which turns a right into a retractable handout); that you have used it for at least 20 years (an accepted stand-in for proof that a right has been earned by virtue of being exercised since ''time immemorial,'' a period which, because of quirks of English law, officially ended with the death of Henry II in 1189); and that you and others have used the path openly without your right to do so being challenged. Open-access land cannot have been ''improved'' by agriculture, proof of which often requires expensive certifications by botanists. This can lead to absurdity, says Ashbrook, who likes to walk up a hill near her house in the Chilterns. It looks the same all over, but because of what Ashbrook described as ''botanical issues of great detail,'' only one side qualified as access land, open for rambling. The other is closed.

To Hayes, it seemed as if all these technicalities undercut the rights that the CROW Act was supposed to enshrine. They made clear that the rules about who owned what and who could go where were cultural and historical artifacts, not laws of nature. They were just choices.

Another approach was visible just across the border. In 2003, the Scottish Parliament passed a land-reform bill that recognized the uncontested right to walk, camp, cycle, swim, canoe and perform any other form of nonmotorized exploration throughout the country. Known as the ''right to roam,'' it came with a code of responsibilities: Access didn't apply to private gardens immediately around houses or to fields in active cultivation, and people were expected to clean up their litter and dog poop, to cook on stoves instead of open fires, to avoid rock climbing near nesting birds, to close gates behind them and so on. But it was clear and direct and not even unique to Scotland. Similar systems had long been in place in other European countries, including Finland, Norway, Iceland, Austria, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Switzerland. In some cases, the right was considered so old and so fundamental, so obvious, that for a long time no one bothered to codify it. In Sweden, the tourism board developed an ad campaign around the allure of what the country calls allemansrätten, or everyman's right. ''It's a right protected by the law that allows me to sleep and eat and walk pretty much wherever I want,'' the voice-over explains. ''Now you can, too.''

As Hayes began researching land ownership, he came across the work of Guy Shrubsole, an environmental campaigner who, in an effort to find out who owned the land whose management practices he was worried about, had spent years filing records requests and poring over maps, writing a blog and later a book called ''Who Owns England?'' In answering the question, Shrubsole painted a stark picture of inequality and secrecy: Only 5 percent of the country was owned by ordinary householders. Large chunks were held by corporations and by the aristocracy and gentry, often following boundaries that were relics of the land divisions and gifts made after the Norman Conquest in 1066. (The Land Registry does not track land using these categories.) ''A few thousand dukes, baronets and country squires own far more land than all of middle England put together,'' Shrubsole wrote. He cited a remark by the late Duke of Westminster, who advised aspiring entrepreneurs in Britain to ''make sure they have an ancestor who was a very close friend of William the Conqueror.'' If you wanted to know how much of England's land offered no right of access, even to ramblers, even after the CROW Act, the answer was 92 percent.

''Property,'' Shrubsole told me, ''isn't really a thing. It's a bundle of rights,'' a series of possible actions that are associated with tracts of land but that can be severed, bought, sold and expanded or curtailed by the specific legal codes that govern that land. This was why you hear people speak of mineral rights or surface rights or water rights or commoners' rights or treaty rights, which in the United States often include ongoing rights to fish, hunt and gather on land that tribes no longer control. ''Part of that bundle of rights in England for the last several hundred years has been the right to exclude other people from your land,'' Shrubsole says. ''The thing is, that's not always the case in every country, and even in other liberal, capitalist democracies.''

England had exported its view of private property to much of the world, but it also had its own long history of resistance to privatization. (Notable examples include the Diggers, who seized a hill in Surrey in 1649, planting crops and declaring to the gentry, ''The earth was not made purposely for you, to be Lords of it, and we to be your Slaves, Servants and Beggers, but it was made to be a common Livelihood of all.'') ''Sure, you can have private property,'' Shrubsole says. ''But does it always have to be on such extreme terms that you can't share it with anyone else?''

In late 2019, the Conservative Party was elected in a landslide and proposed charging unpermitted campers with criminal trespass. Hayes and Shrubsole started a petition opposing the idea. It received enough signatures to trigger a debate in Parliament, but the bill continued to move forward. Shrubsole remembers sitting with Hayes around a kitchen table in London, wondering what to do next -- how to convince their country that access to the land was a right worth fighting for.

Shortly afterward, Covid hit. Lockdowns were strict in England, where illicit parties were enough to eventually bring down a once-popular prime minister. Indoor gathering places shut down, and outdoor exercise, which was allowed only once a day and only in the area where a person lived, became precious. Catherine Flitcroft, of the British Mountaineering Council, told me that across the country, ''the outdoors became the new pub and the new playground,'' a lifeline for people who felt trapped and alone.

But many soon found that a frustrating amount of the countryside was closed off to them. Paths that people had assumed to be legal rights of way turned out to be only permissive paths; landowners, overwhelmed by the surge of eager walkers, some of whom left large messes behind, could and did revoke access. Swimmers, canoers, climbers and kayakers struggled to understand where they were allowed to go, because many landowners maintained that ownership of a lakefront or riverbed included a right to exclude people from ''their'' section of water. Though it was illegal to block public paths with gates or fences, or to hide signs designating them as such, or put up new ones threatening dangerous dogs or bulls, would-be walkers told me that they encountered all of this. And community leaders from marginalized groups pointed out that many barriers to access were invisible: People were often dissuaded from rambling at all because they had good reason to fear the outcome if they ended up somewhere they weren't allowed to be.

During that first Covid summer, Hayes's account of his explorations, ''The Book of Trespass,'' was released. The book argued that the hard-won public paths, in enshrining some rights, forestalled others: ''They simultaneously legitimize the space that is off limits.'' It soon became a best seller. Hayes and Shrubsole set up a campaign website, encouraging people to make their own respectful trespasses into areas that were closed off to them. They also started to work with other organizers to call for a full, Scottish-style ''right to roam'' in England.

''Our desire to access nature,'' they wrote, ''should not be a crime.''

The first trespasses were small: groups of friends poring over local maps, considering the land around them in new ways. In Totnes, the town in Devon where Shrubsole lives, he and a few others explored Berry Pomeroy, a nearby estate owned by the Duke of Somerset. There was a permissive footpath through one section, but though the estate dominates the landscape and though it receives taxpayer subsidies, they had never seen the rest. The woods turned out to be full of pheasants -- nonnative game birds imported to Britain each year by the tens of millions for shooting.

In Devon, local people began holding trespasses every month. As Hayes did while writing his book, they stayed well away from houses and stuck to actions that would be considered trespasses in England but legal in Scotland. Lewis Winks, a researcher and environmental campaigner who helped organize the gatherings, told me that it felt like being a detective in your own backyard: You were figuring out who owned what and why and suddenly realizing that there was a great deal more land around than you ever visited or even really noticed. Moving in a group, you felt empowered, almost immune to signs telling you that you didn't belong. You also noticed, he added, that a country that some politicians liked to describe as full or overcrowded, and therefore in need of tighter borders, was full of open space.

''You realize,'' Winks said, ''that we basically exist in the corridors between these big estates.''

In 2022, Parliament passed the promised anti-trespassing bill. The core group of Right to Roam organizers continued to grow, while encouraging people to form their own local chapters. In Northumberland, organizers arranged buses to take children who live in light-polluted cities into the countryside at night, because so many English people now grow up without being able to see the Milky Way. In Gloucestershire, trespassers climbed a stone wall into an estate owned by the Duke of Beaufort, where botanists taught attendees about the native plants they found there -- the idea being that people who feel attached to a landscape will be inspired to protect it. The campaigners organized another trespass at Berry Pomeroy, this time with hundreds of people, who carried a banner that read ''Right to Roam'' and picked up litter as they went. They walked together to a sunny hillside, where they picnicked.

The wholesomeness was purposeful: an attempt to show that people could use land not just responsibly but also in a nourishing way. Though the campaigns received a fair amount of positive coverage -- even the right-leaning Daily Mail offered a friendly account of the Berry Pomeroy trespass, quoting Shrubsole's ''Less room for pheasants, more room for peasants!'' quip in their headline -- there were plenty of doubters. Some seasoned organizers worried that a call for a right to roam might jeopardize the right-of-way system they have worked so hard to create or that embracing trespass could give all ramblers a bad name. Landowners' associations argued that the current system was adequate and that expanding it would risk public safety: ''How many more wildfires will there be? How many more sheep will be attacked by dogs? What damage will be done to crops?''

In his book, Hayes argued that what he called ''the cult of exclusion'' was possible because it was undergirded by a powerful story of inevitability, including the belief that open access would mean disrespectful or ignorant people mistreating the land. (In the United States, this idea was most vociferously articulated in an essay called ''The Tragedy of the Commons,'' written in 1968 by the ecologist and eugenicist Garrett Hardin, who argued that it was the fate of any communally managed property to be mismanaged and destroyed. Hardin's work has since been widely debunked, including by the Nobel Prize-winning political scientist Elinor Ostrom, who showed that communities around the world are capable of managing shared resources sustainably.) Right to Roam organizers countered that another story was possible, one in which people were educated to appreciate and protect places they saw as partially their own.

Amy-Jane Beer, one of the core organizers, likes to point to a study by researchers at the University of Derby, which compared 14 European Union countries according to their biodiversity and their residents' felt connection to nature. In each case, Britain ranked lowest. ''Those things are not disconnected,'' Beer says. ''People are losing without being aware of what they're losing.''

And then came Dartmoor.

In England -- unlike in the United States or in parks in Africa and elsewhere that are sometimes accused of practicing ''fortress conservation,'' cordoning off nature at the expense of local people -- there's little illusion that a national park is, should or even could be a wild place untouched by human history. Dartmoor is full of ancient archaeological sites as well as mining scars, good-size towns, uncountable sheep and ponies, military practice ranges and even a large prison. You can't visit without understanding the land as a balance of uses.

One of those uses, today, is camping. For decades, Dartmoor was the only park in England that recognized camping among the forms of recreation to which users are entitled. Elsewhere, some people still camp, but they do so somewhat stealthily -- ''you just set up late and pack up early,'' as Winks told me -- or with the understanding that they may be moved along. To quote the leader of a group of backpackers I met: ''We just kind of walk until we hit somewhere we can't, and then we go somewhere else.'' Many youth groups, and those who aren't comfortable camping where it isn't allowed, stick to Dartmoor.

In 2022, the hedge-fund manager Alexander Darwall and his wife, Diana, who had purchased a 4,000-acre estate inside Dartmoor, announced that they would be suing the park to keep people from camping on what was now their land. At first, the big access organizations didn't believe that wild camping could really be under threat and paid little attention. A small group of local residents, including Winks, a walking guide named Gillian Healey and others who were organizing trespasses nearby, decided, over pints at a pub, to plan a rally on one of Darwall's moors, to be held shortly after the court was scheduled to rule on the suit. ''We thought there'd probably be about 15 of us,'' Winks says, but no matter which way the decision went, they figured they would either want to celebrate or protest. They came up with a name for their group: the Stars Are for Everyone.

A week before the planned gathering, in January 2023, the Chancellor of the High Court ruled that the long-assumed right to camp in Dartmoor didn't actually exist. Darwall, and any other landowner who wanted to, could kick campers out right away. Suddenly, thousands of people wanted to join the protest, which was set to depart from Cornwood, a tiny village clustered around narrow lanes on the edge of the park. Organizers rented 10 buses to shuttle the protesters in. To help feed everyone, residents of the village baked pasties and delivered them to the local pub.

A parade of people set off on a two-mile walk to Darwall's land, using a right of way flanked on either side by private security guards holding dogs. It was, said one participant, ''a conga line of humanity.'' Many people told Healey that they weren't campers themselves but that they saw the decision as part of a much bigger story about their country and where they fit inside it. Healey agreed: To her, the loss was like a new form of enclosure. That, too, had been a gradual but devastating winnowing of rights.

When the crowd arrived at the top of a hill, organizers were waiting with a surprise. Hiding just behind the crest were a group of musicians and a giant puppet they called Old Crockern, after a mythic figure from Dartmoor's past who is said to be the spirit of the moor; in one story, he warns a rich man who has come to plow the land with a steam engine, ''if you scratch my back, I'll scratch out your pockets!'' When the puppet crested the hill into the slanting winter sunshine, crowds of children ran toward it, dancing.

The Dartmoor National Park Authority appealed the ruling. In the meantime, it came to an agreement with some of the other landowners, paying them to continue to allow camping. What had been a right became a mere permission. Winks found himself camping less because he was no longer sure where it was actually allowed. ''They've stolen the goose and are selling us back the eggs,'' he said, ''and we're told to be grateful.''

The Labour Party, for its part, reacted to the news by promising to introduce a Scottish-style Right to Roam bill the next time it came to power.

One spring morning about a week after the swim at Kinder Reservoir, and five months after the Dartmoor ruling, I met another group of trespassers. This time they gathered on the village green of a tiny place called Ham, under the branches of a blooming horse-chestnut tree.

Most of the 70 or so people who arrived for the walk came from Bristol, 20 miles away, home to a particularly active group of right-to-roam advocates who meet twice a month and go on outings that members take turns designing.

On this day, the walk leader was Jim Rosseinsky, a member of a local choir, who brought along some of his choir mates. Rosseinsky said that ''The Book of Trespass'' moved him to act because ''it was just so reasonable.'' Before setting out, he warned the group to watch out for ''sharp-branch-related jeopardy'' and to take care with where they placed their feet: ''We want to show that we can care for the land that we're walking on.''

The group set off down a narrow lane, crossed a bridge and passed a field where horses grazed. A large stone castle appeared in the distance. A woman named Mary Stevens, who had read ''Who Owns England?'' told those gathered that it was still owned by the same family to whom the land was granted in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest. They were also given considerable land in Bristol -- where, many of the walkers told me, they could not afford to buy houses -- including in the neighborhood where the choir practices.

The long trail of people wound through fields and into a tiny scrap of woodland, where the choir leader, Sorrel Wilde, led the group in an old chant: ''Put your roots down/put your feet on the ground/you can hear the earth sing/if you listen,'' we sang, until the words lost their cheesiness and began to feel profound and peaceful. It took ages to enter another glen, because there were so many people stepping so cautiously over the bluebells.

As they walked, people told me what had brought them to spend their bank holiday Monday trespassing around a castle with strangers. Many spoke about wanting more access to nature, but they also framed the walk in grander terms. Maria Fernandez Garcia, a botanist who had become a leader of the group, said it was a balm ''to hear other people's deep and similar feelings'' about the ways the country wasn't working for ordinary people and how it could do better. Danny Balla listed a series of things that he wished were seen as commons, to be shared and stewarded, but which were instead enclosed, privatized and exploited: gathering places in cities, the air, the water, the climate. A mother of two young children told me that as a renter, struggling amid Britain's cost-of-living crisis, ''it would be very easy to feel that I had very little power,'' but trespasses like this helped. The more of them she went on, the more illusory the borders that constrained her life felt. ''It's an antidote to everything feeling divided and enclosed,'' she said.

A woman named Holly Marjoram told me that while walking is often a solitary activity, this version made it feel like part of something large and powerful, connected to a whole world of people who would fight for the land. She had also been to the big trespass at Berry Pomeroy and the protest on Dartmoor.

A few months later, in mid-July, the Royal Courts of Justice would hear the park's challenge to the ruling that favored the Darwalls. Inside the court, the two sides debated what the park's bylaws meant by allowing ''open-air recreation'' -- Was a tent open-air? Are you recreating when you're asleep? -- while protesters filled the sidewalk outside. A ruling is still pending.

In Ham, after the trespass, the group stopped in a churchyard for lunch, where more thermoses of tea emerged from backpacks. ''It's nice to imagine a world where we can walk farther and feel freer,'' said a woman in tall rubber boots. And then it was back to the village green, where some people taught a folk dance, some drifted off to the pub next door and some sang along to a final song:

Ours is a wild and beautiful land

much unknown to us.

We are the land.

And the land is us.

Another group arrived late and dripping, having been lured into the cool river by the first hot day of spring. People kept asking Rosseinsky which parts of the walk were trespasses and which parts were within their rights. It had been hard for them to tell.

## What's Past is Prologue.

Wyatt Mason | July 30, 2023 | NYTMag

*Wyatt Mason is a contributing writer for the magazine and teaches at Bard College. He last wrote about the writer Akhil Sharma. Ruven Afanador is a Colombian-born photographer based in New York. He has worked on numerous portraits for the magazine, including Viola Davis, Denzel Washington, Jane Campion and Sharon Olds.*

''The weird thing about growing up kidnapped,'' Shane McCrae, the 47-year-old American poet, told me in his melodious, reedy voice one rainy afternoon in May, ''is if it happens early enough, there's a way in which you kind of don't know.''

There was no reason for McCrae to have known. What unfolded in McCrae's childhood -- between a June day in 1979 when his white grandmother took him from his Black father and disappeared, and another day, 13 years later, when McCrae opened a phone book in Salem, Ore., found a name he hoped was his father's and placed a call -- is both an unambiguous story of abduction and a convoluted story of complicity. It loops through the American landscape, from Oregon to Texas to California to Oregon again, and, even now, wends through the vaster emotional country of a child and his parents. And because so much of what happened to McCrae happened in homes where he was beaten and lied to and threatened, where he was made to understand that Black people were inferior to whites, where he was taught to hail Hitler, where he was told that his dark skin meant he tanned easily but, no, not that he was Black, it's a story that's been hard for McCrae to piece together.

''My grandparents,'' McCrae explained in a somewhat gloomy, book-laden office at Columbia University, where he teaches poetry in its M.F.A. program, ''were so actively keeping my father away from me -- they didn't want me to investigate him at all -- it was just normal.'' Normal, McCrae explained, because the story he had been told by his grandparents was that McCrae's father, whose name he didn't even know, abandoned him before he was born. ''They had been doing it my whole life,'' McCrae said matter-of-factly. ''I didn't think of it as, Oh, this is pretty strange.''

McCrae paused. ''The aftereffects of all that,'' he continued, ''it took me until -- to really understand that I had been a kidnapped child -- probably my early 40s when it finally started to make sense and I really got it, and I was like, Oh, this is a big deal. I had used the phrase before -- 'growing up kidnapped' -- but somehow used it without it really sinking in. It was a thing that I was aware of as, This is technically true, but without really understanding what that means.''

McCrae's new book, the memoir ''Pulling the Chariot of the Sun'' -- it is being released on Aug. 1 -- is his attempt to construct, at a remove of four decades, an understanding of what happened and what it has come to mean. The memoir takes the reader through McCrae's childhood, from his earliest memories after being taken from his father to when, at 16, he found him again. Like many accomplished memoirs that have followed from St. Augustine's pioneering ''Confessions,'' McCrae's explores memory's uncertain contours, but like few memoirs before it, ''Pulling the Chariot of the Sun'' offers the experience, in prose, of that uncertainty. It's essentially a 250-page avant-garde prose poem that has more in common with Virginia Woolf's (excellent, difficult) novel ''The Waves'' than with Hua Hsu's (excellent, not difficult) memoir ''Stay True'' -- or any memoir you might name. McCrae's sentences are constantly stating and retracting, moving forward and retreating, establishing a perimeter around an event while trying to penetrate it, to enter the chalk outline drawn around a body long buried, that of the boy McCrae was before he was taken. At first, the mode can be off-putting; decisions and revisions that a minute can reverse, the reader left to wonder why the same story -- McCrae's birth, say, as it was reported to him -- is told multiple times. But it's not long before the initial aesthetic perplexity resolves for the reader into the recognition that this is how a mind works with the past: eternal return, compulsive attempts to make something hold over which you have no control. And then the reader begins to welcome -- need, in fact -- McCrae's multiplicities, that straining for resolution. The memoir accumulates a hugeness of feeling that puts a lie to the idea that difficulty in a piece of writing is necessarily cold or aloof or incompatible with the kind of intense emotion that McCrae's narrative uncommonly yields.

''Until I was 13, I slept with the light on,'' McCrae writes midway through the memoir, ''the main light in my bedroom, the light in the ceiling, sometimes still wearing the clothes I had worn that day, sometimes even wearing my shoes. Most of my childhood I felt I had to be prepared to be taken from my life at any moment.''

''Pulling the Chariot of the Sun'' is the story of an undoing, but it is no less a story of becoming. McCrae takes the reader to the house where he was made to live with his grandparents; documents how he was thrown, at age 3, into a wall by his grandfather, because he was crying for his father; how he was knocked unconscious; how the beatings continued as McCrae matured, until his grandmother divorced the grandfather when McCrae was 14. There are visits from his mother and his brief, failed period living with her as a teenager; time at multiple schools -- three in ninth grade alone -- where he sat at the backs of rooms, a middling student, largely friendless. But there is also the freedom and pleasure he experienced skateboarding, at which he excelled enough to be able to see, vividly, the fine line that separated his skills from those of skaters who became pros. And there's McCrae's revelation, as a 10th grader who would go on to repeat the year, that a standardized test put his writing at an eighth-grade level, the metrics of the world reporting that he was, contrary to his sense of himself, stupid. Seeded within that plausible sadness and loneliness and horror and hopelessness is the story of the strange concatenation of events that produced the moment when McCrae found his path to poetry, first as anchor to life and then as avenue to himself. His memoir is, therefore, and perhaps most memorably, a Bildungsroman, a portrait of a poet as a young Black man -- a boy raised in a particular crucible of capture that, as part of its power, enacts the American story of seizure and captivity of Black people by white tormentors.

McCrae dropped out of high school and got an equivalency diploma. By 19, he was on his own, married, father of a daughter, but without a clear path forward, only a clear ambition to write poetry. Through that period, he kept to a strict regimen of reading 200 pages a day -- eight books at once in rotation, 25 pages from each -- absorbing writing from every era, understanding that, beyond his need to make it, he knew nothing about poetry. What he did know, having been an excellent skateboarder, was that if you wanted to land a reverse ollie, you needed your 10,000 hours to get there. He entered community college at 21; after transferring twice, he graduated from a good local college, Linfield, at 26, with an acceptance letter from the premier M.F.A. program in the world, the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Graduating in 2004, he went straight to Harvard Law School, to get a J.D., thinking that he would briefly support himself as a lawyer. McCrae didn't like law school but completed it, and as he was doing so, because he could take courses elsewhere at the university, he applied for a place in the poetry workshop of a poet he had been reading for years, Jorie Graham.

''It seemed at the start that he didn't know if he should be there, if he wanted to be there,'' Graham wrote to me. ''But, as we say, 'he had an ear.' He wrote a slightly conventional poem, and his heart was tight, and his natural voice was through clenched teeth. I felt anger on his page, repressed anger. I felt he had been beaten down by some great force -- some injustice beyond the injustice of being Black in America. But I could not break through to it.

''At some point he came to me in my office with a strange draft where a few lines broke apart at what would have been prosodical caesuras, and as we spoke, he shared a great personal grief and burden. And -- I remember this vividly -- I looked back and forth from his broad open suddenly vulnerable face to the lines broken open by a kind of stuttering breath, or a breath taken to squelch a sob, and I thought: Here it is, here we go, his ear is released.

''The next week he had a handful of poems in that form. The form worked because it correlated to the griefs he was undergoing.''

Since 2009, McCrae has published 13 books of poetry, hundreds of pages of supremely accomplished verse. He has written, autobiographically, on the dissolution of marriage and the challenges of fatherhood; on the reality of racism as he has encountered it and as American history has fostered it; and on sin and its purgation and transcendence, not in some abstract mode but from a decidedly Christian perspective (McCrae is a practicing Episcopalian). But these are just themes; every poet has them, and they say nothing about what might make verse notable, durable. It is McCrae's own deep knowledge, and use, of the history of poetic form that has marked his work and made it, identifiably, his own. McCrae has written scores of sonnets with the form's standard 70 beats and its characteristic meter of iambic pentameter, and yet a reader encountering these poems for the first time on the page, where they do not look like sonnets -- the lines are ruptured, gapped, slashed, broken at the ''wrong'' places -- would be hard-pressed to see a sonnet's shape hiding there in plain sight. But as you not so much push through them as are pulled along by the currents in them, a freight of feeling accumulates and, by the end of his best poems, detonates in final lines that are often so aggressively felt that you hardly notice the rigor of the meter that has gotten you there.

''I tend to think that poems,'' McCrae told me, ''they're smarter than the people who write them, and they're smarter than the people that read them. A poem that is successful is a poem that you can never entirely possess. It will always resist you through its sort of fathomless difficulty. That there's always going to be some new thing with the poem -- because you haven't gotten the whole thing.''

Many of McCrae's poems have addressed the pain in his own biography. The first poem, ''The Cardinal Is the Marriage Bird,'' in his first major book, ''Mule,'' ends with the word ''wound.'' A suite of poems follows in which McCrae takes on the role of the book's title animal, sired Black, dammed white -- poems set in the Texas to which he was taken, among them three different poems all called ''Mulatto,'' a word the Spanish root of which means ''young mule,'' capturing a boy's awareness of the rupture at the center of his nature; or ''Niggers on TV,'' a harrowing, but also strangely tender, poem that captures the effects of his grandfather's racism on a little boy who liked to dance along with the Huxtables, when ''The Cosby Show'' came on, with his grandmother (''I only ever saw her dance with me''-- which, not at all incidentally, dances along in iambic pentameter), a complicated act of love nesting within the horror.

Over the years, McCrae has burrowed into the ugliness of how whites have treated Blacks, imagining the voices of historical figures like Jim Limber, a mixed-race orphan adopted by the family of Jefferson Davis at the end of his time as president of the Confederacy, irreconcilable depictions of violence and love. All the while, McCrae has nudged closer to exploring the grotesquerie of his own treatment, earlier poems using the word ''taken'' before the newer poems incorporated, finally, the word that McCrae knows to be true: ''kidnapped.''

I wondered why McCrae felt he needed, now, to approach this history, already glimpsed in his mature work, through narrative.

''Up until that point,'' McCrae told me, ''I wrote stuff that I figured one would write: Being as how I was kidnapped, what is the sort of thing a person who was kidnapped would say? In a lot of my poems, that's the way I was thinking about it. But it wasn't until I wrote the memoir that I started to understand that it wasn't like being kidnapped was someone running up to you every day and shouting, 'Hey, you're kidnapped!' -- which is what the moment of the poem kind of feels like: a dramatization. Being kidnapped is just ... you're living your life, and no one is telling you what the premise is.''

''I used to think that there was something wrong with my emotional life,'' McCrae told me later, ''because I had difficulty conjuring up feelings about, like, when my grandmother died'' -- from complications of Alzheimer's, while he was in law school -- ''I was like, OK, well, here's something I'm supposed to feel. And I couldn't. I was aware that being taken from my father when I was, and my subsequent experiences, really broke something in my ability to connect with family that is generationally before me. What I feel is the absence of feeling things that I should.''

As I sought to fill in McCrae's early years, I felt I needed to speak with his mother and father. He expressed some hesitation, however, and before he ultimately said it would be fine with him and with them if I did, I spoke with one of McCrae's high school teachers, who shifted those conversations in an unexpected direction. The day after we spoke, she texted yearbook photos from when McCrae would have been in ninth and 10th grade. There he was, in two adolescent shots a year apart. His name was listed not as McCrae but as Baker.

''Oh, yes, that's right,'' Denise Baker, McCrae's mom, told me on the phone from her home in Portland, Ore. ''Baker was Shane's last name.'' Baker was the name of her stepfather, Morris, whom everyone called Morrie and whom Denise called, during our conversations, ''the monster.'' He was her mother's fifth and final husband; they married when Denise was 5. Denise says that when she was still small, he kicked her down a hallway so hard that it felt as if he broke her tailbone. When she became a teenager, they fought outright. He was a racist, and she had Black friends. Things got bad. Her mom and Morrie called her fat, worthless, stupid. She repeatedly ran away; when she was around 14, her parents told the state that she was out of control, and she was remanded to juvenile detention for a year. After she got out, she was emancipated from her parents. ''They didn't want to have to take care of me anymore,'' Denise told me.

Denise talked about meeting McCrae's father, Stanley, about which McCrae writes in the memoir -- how his eventual father ''approached her slowly from an impossible distance, somehow both in and beyond the Kmart, dressed, she would say, 'like Super Fly.' She would have been 15; he was most likely 17 or 18. She never told me what he ordered; she never told me what they talked about.''

As to why, three years later, Shane was born a Baker, and not a McCrae, as Denise tells it, a hospital staff member said that because she and Stanley weren't married, he wouldn't be able to put his name on the form. If he wanted to claim paternity, he could within six months if he filed a formal application. Soon after she was released from the hospital, she and Shane joined Stanley in Salem.

''We hung out and talked,'' Stanley told me from his home in San Diego. ''I'm like, When do I need to sign the birth certificate? And she was like, Well, actually, I wanted to talk to you about that because my dad'' -- Morrie -- ''can't have kids. And he was saying that if you let him put Shane in the Baker name, when he passes, everything he has will go to Shane. And I'm like, Really? Because I'm not a rich man. She said yes. And I'm like, OK, he can be in the Baker name. When he gets older, if he wants to change it, he can change it. So this is to me where the story began. All of a sudden, he's in the Baker name.''

It wasn't long after the birth that Denise and Stanley were no longer in a romantic relationship. Shane was initially with Denise in Portland. Sometimes she stayed with her parents, who were living there. By the time McCrae was nearing 3, Denise began to feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of being a parent -- afraid that she was going to be abusive to Shane the way her parents had been to her. Not long after, Stanley took Shane to Salem to live with him.

On June 2, 1979, Stanley's grandfather died. He told Denise he wanted to take Shane to the funeral in Arizona. Denise said that was fine. ''Probably that same day,'' Stanley recalled, ''the grandmother came over. I had bought Shane this little tricycle. And he just loved it. We were outside playing, he's riding on the tricycle, the grandmother pulls up and says, I'd like to see him before he leaves. I'm like, Yeah, absolutely. We're not leaving for a couple of days. And she says, Well, can he spend the night? I'm like, No problem, no problem. And she's like, I'll bring him back tomorrow. I thought nothing at all. But then the next day came, and he wasn't back. That morning. That evening. And I'm like, What the heck? She knows that I'm leaving. So I went over to her house. Now, I hadn't been to her house in several years, but I knew where she lived. And I went to the house, and the house was empty. The house is up for sale.''

I asked Denise about the house, a detail that didn't make sense to me, and she explained that her parents had moved before Shane was born, to a house in Portland where Stanley had never been. Naturally, I wanted to know what Stanley did when he saw the empty house. He said that he called Denise and that she said she told her mother that Stanley was taking Shane to Arizona for a funeral -- but that she had not told her mother to take Shane. Stanley was in touch with Denise for a week by phone, but nothing became clearer to him about where Shane was, only that Denise said he must be with them. And then, along with the grandparents and Shane, she disappeared.

Here's the part of the story that no one can clarify, but it seems that the essential sadness and horror is this: Denise's parents convinced her that they could give Shane a better life, and absolutely a better life than he would have with Stanley. At some point, Denise agreed that her parents could take him to Texas, where Morrie had a new job, and that once she got herself together she would come get Shane. Precisely when they moved, and precisely what degree of involvement Denise had in that move -- it's clear that she didn't tell Stanley what was happening. ''I don't know what I was thinking,'' Denise told me, clearly in tears, on several calls. ''I was so young. I was not ready to be a mom. And I will regret that for the rest of my life.''

Denise did try to take custody of Shane a year after her mother and stepfather moved to Texas. When she went down, Morrie threatened her. ''Well, if you try to take Shane,'' Denise told me Morrie said, ''we'll take him to Mexico, and you'll never see him again.'' Denise believed him. ''I was just scared to death,'' she said, ''but I have no idea why I didn't just take him.''

I asked Stanley what he did to try to find Shane.

''You know, at that particular time, back in the '80s, I'm in Salem, Ore., which is basically white,'' under two percent Black. ''I was Black, and his name was Baker.'' Stanley continued, ''The stuff I had been through with police in my life -- I didn't trust police.'' Stanley said he did speak with one white officer he knew, who said that without his son having his name, there wasn't going to be any chance of getting him back.

It felt like a stupid question, but I asked Stanley how he felt after Shane disappeared. ''Shane was my world,'' Stanley said. ''I was raised in church to believe that everybody had good in them. When I lost Shane, I totally turned to God. I'm like, I've evidently been messing up in my life, and I'm being punished. I became a deacon in the church and would pray on my knees and ask for my kid to show up and for me to be able to find him.''

When Shane would have been about 8 or 9, Stanley's sister, Carol, ran into Denise in Salem, and Denise went over to their mother's house to talk. ''I'm like, Where is Shane? And she was like, Well, he's at my parents'. And I'm like: Look, I agreed that your dad could use his name because he didn't have anybody carrying on his name. And I'm trying to be a good person. But now you guys have taken my kid and disappeared. I want Shane in my name now, and I want him.'' Stanley paused. ''So Denise is like, OK, well, yeah, we can put him in the McCrae name. She gave me a phone number for Shane, but it was a wrong number. And that was the last time I heard from Denise.''

Some eight years after that, 13 years after his abduction, Shane found his way back to his father. One day, Stanley recalled, he ''had been at work, and I was with my now-wife'' of more than 30 years, Kandace, ''and I got to my door, and I was like, Weird. And she's like, What? I'm like: I feel Shane. His scent seems to be around me. I haven't had that since he was 3 years old.''

''Everybody that I know,'' Stanley said, ''I'd always told about Shane. I mean, he's my first kid. We did everything together. We'd be riding down the road, and he'd go: That's a '56 Chevy! At 3 years old! That's a '57 Chevy! I'm like, Man, look at my smart kid. I was just so proud of him, watching the way that he grew, and then they just ripped him out of my life.''

A couple of weeks after he sensed Shane, Stanley told me, ''my wife called me and said: Hey, guess what? Shane called! I'm like, What?'' McCrae had gotten his father's name from his grandmother a few years earlier and, at a certain point, reached a moment in his life when he sought that name in a phone book and dialed the number next to it. ''So we made an appointment to pick him up. And when I got to him, I'm like: Dude, I told Kandace I got your scent. It seemed like you had been at my door.'' Some years later, McCrae changed his last name to match his father's.

Some people go through the worst in life, and it destroys them; others, no less beset, see it move through them. ''Some people think that I am troublingly optimistic,'' McCrae told me back in his office. ''I don't know if that's true. But it's rather more that I tend to believe, for reasons I can't fully explain, the good, or at least the least-complicated version that would fall on the side of good.''

It seemed to me that McCrae's optimism might be called faith. ''I got this tattoo when I was in law school,'' McCrae said, rolling his left forearm over to reveal a large, black Latin cross. ''When I did my very first reading, for my first chapbook, 'One Neither One'''-- from 2009, its cover a sketch of shackles that can look like a pair of eyes, staring at the reader -- ''I made sure to wear a jacket so nobody would see it. Because I was afraid.'' Growing up, McCrae continued, ''there was this kind of feeling that if you had a Christian belief, you can't believe in God and be smart. That was the feeling I got in the circles I ran in. And I felt really weird about it, really insecure, because I did believe.'' McCrae laughed. ''So when I was first trying to be a poet, I didn't want anybody to know I was a Christian. It was a source of worry for a pretty long time. I'm also really ashamed of how, at least the Christians that get attention in America, how a lot of them act. It fills me with dismay. And I didn't want to be associated with that.''

McCrae told me how, at 19, he'd asked God to give him a sign. If God did, McCrae would believe in him. The next day, McCrae went up to the Mount Angel monastery, a half-hour out of Salem, and there was a storm, thunder and lightning, and when he was getting ready to leave, the road out was blocked by two fallen trees. McCrae says he didn't feel that God would waste his time knocking down trees so a kid would believe, but he had asked for a sign, and there one was. McCrae tried Islam; Daoism, but eventually came around to Christianity. He was baptized a Christian at 29 while at Harvard Law. He had also been taking classes at the Episcopal divinity school -- had imagined, still imagines, another path for himself as a priest -- but after a term, he learned he wasn't eligible to take more. And yet, since then, the two things -- belief in art and faith in God -- have come together.

Fractured through McCrae's work, then, is what could be read as a very long poem that has appeared in parts through four books. There's a purgatory, a heaven, and a hell. McCrae is long done with purgatory and heaven, but ''The Hell Poem,'' which first appeared in 2019, keeps getting bigger. A few weeks before I wrote this article, he sent me the whole poem -- or rather all of it minus two sections he has yet to write. It's harrowing and strange and also extremely funny in moments; it completes what I can't help seeing as a kind of Commedia, written by someone who believes equally in the word and the Word.

I asked McCrae about the process by which he came to understand that Christ was God's son, and how the pain that God allowed to be brought upon Jesus, the wounds inflicted on his body, ended up making sense to him. In that context, I asked him why we suffer. ''It's actually a question that I don't think about all that much,'' he said, ''which feels terrible, because I'm so often on the verge of tears thinking about the suffering of others.'' He paused. ''It's God's universe. God can do what God wants. Which is kind of what St. Augustine said: God doesn't owe us happy lives.''

Throughout June and into July, I ended up going back and forth between McCrae's parents many times, trying to reconcile their individual versions of events. One day I got a text from Stanley. ''Denise contacted me on Facebook a couple hours ago. We ended up talking on the phone and she remembers a lot but, just like me she's forgot a lot. She does remember how upset she was when her mother lied to me and came and got Shane. I believe she was really hurt regarding that whole situation, and she seems to be struggling with how everything went down.''

I called Denise to ask her about the conversation with Stanley. ''It's ... it's really painful for me what Shane went through, and I feel extremely at fault. And it's something that I'll probably deal with forever. But I wanted to help change part of that. So I looked up Oregon laws to see if Stanley could get on his birth certificate even now, and it sounds like he could. So I reached out to Stanley.''

As Stanley understood it, the only thing he had agreed to, 47 years earlier, was that his son would have the Baker name. He had not known that the birth certificate would make no mention of him as the father. But now he had seen the evidence for himself. I asked if I could see it. He texted it along.

The Certificate of Live Birth shows that on Sept. 22, 1975, a child, in Box 1, Shane Alan Baker, was born at 6:59 p.m., to mother, in Box 6a, Denise Alynne Baker. Box 8a, for father, is blank. It is as if no such person existed.

Though McCrae says he was kidnapped from his father when he was 3, he is, in a way, wrong. It took place on the day he was born.

''I'm glad that's happening,'' McCrae said of adding Stanley's name to his birth certificate. ''Me changing my name to his last name when I was in my very early 20s was really important, and that was very meaningful to me. The public acknowledgment of him as my father had felt as if I was doing some small thing to right a wrong. It was emotional. I felt driven to do it. So whatever emotions would go with it were emotions that I already felt decades ago.''

On the first of July, Stanley and his wife, each on their separate Harley-Davidsons, began the 21-hour ride from San Diego to Oregon. Stanley wanted to take the forms in himself. Too much for too long had gone wrong; he wasn't about to let anything happen now.

If, in life, McCrae has met this advent with what might seem like a mildness of feeling, in art he has shown a fierce commitment to inventing forms that express significant emotion. The title of McCrae's memoir, ''Pulling the Chariot of the Sun,'' alludes to the Greek myth of a son seeking his father -- Phaethon, a mortal boy; Helios, a god. Phaethon had been told that his father was a god but had never met him. So he went on a journey to find him; did; and asked that the god give him proof of his patrimony. The god said, Anything you ask of me I will grant. The boy asked to drive the chariot of the sun, the one that Helios drove each day to make the sun rise, pulled by four horses of enormous power. The god knew that the boy was no match for the task, and yet he had given himself no choice but to say yes. So Phaethon took the reins at dawn; rose; and of course fell, literally dying to learn that his father's name was his own.

McCrae's version of the story inverts that myth. At his memoir's end, he finds his father, learns his name, and lives.

## Plastic Fantastic

Willa Paskin | July 16, 2023 | NYTMag

*Willa Paskin is a writer and the host of the Slate podcast ''Decoder Ring,'' a narrative series about cracking cultural mysteries. Inez and Vinoodh are art and fashion photographers who have been working together for 37 years.*

The moment Greta Gerwig knew for certain that she could make a movie about Barbie, the most famous and controversial doll in history, she was thinking about death. She had been reading about Ruth Handler, the brash Jewish businesswoman who created the doll -- and who, decades later, had two mastectomies. Handler birthed this toy with its infamous breasts, the figurine who became an enduring avatar of plastic perfection, while being stuck, like all of us, in a fragile and failing human body. This thought sparked something for Gerwig. She envisioned a sunny-minded Barbie stumbling upon a dying woman in her barbecue area. Then Gerwig kept going. It was the beginning of the pandemic. Maybe no one would ever go to the movies again. Maybe no one would ever see what she was working on. Why not go for broke?

Why couldn't the movie begin with a methodologically faithful riff on the opening of Stanley Kubrick's ''2001: A Space Odyssey,'' with little girls bashing in their insipid baby dolls' heads after beholding the revelation that is Barbie? Why couldn't Barbieland be full of Barbies and Kens but free of wind, except when it made the dolls' hair look good? Why couldn't Barbie be overcome by irrepressible thoughts of death in the middle of a choreographed dance number? Why couldn't there be a dream ballet inspired by 1950s musicals and a recurring joke about the lyrics of a Matchbox 20 song? Why couldn't Gerwig love Barbie and criticize Barbie and try to make people feel something new about an object that has been making people feel things for nearly 65 years? Why couldn't she make a movie that would delight Barbie's protective corporate guardians at Mattel, the people at Warner Brothers who bankrolled the roughly $145 million production, the people who hate Barbie, the people who adore Barbie and also herself?

''There's a point in the movie where the Kens are riding invisible horses from their beach battle to the Mojo Dojo Casa Houses,'' Gerwig told me -- a Mojo Dojo Casa House is like a Barbie Dreamhouse, but for Kens -- ''and I think to myself, every time: Why did they let us do this?'' It was late May, less than two months until the movie's theatrical release, and Gerwig was putting in long hours on finishing touches, shuttling between postproduction facilities in Manhattan. Still, the very fact of the movie's existence continued to puzzle and delight her. Why did they let her do this?

The answer seems so obvious now. Mattel, Warner Brothers and the producers let Greta Gerwig make ''Barbie'' so that exactly what is currently happening would happen. So that the fizzy marriage of filmmaker and material would break though the cacophony of contemporary life and return a retirement-age hunk of plastic to the zeitgeist. So that Mattel, in particular, could rocket-launch its grand ambitions to become a proto-Disney and announce the activation of its entire intellectual-property back catalog with a fuchsia splash. So that Barbie stans and Barbie agnostics alike would find themselves bombarded by paparazzi snaps of Margot Robbie, as Barbie, and Ryan Gosling, as Ken, dressed in matching, radioactively vivid Rollerblading outfits -- plus ''Barbie'' trailers, #Barbiecore TikToks and wall-to-wall Barbie tie-ins. They wanted Gerwig, with her indie bona fides, feminist credentials and multiple Oscar nominations, to use her credibility to make this multibillion-dollar platinum-blond I.P. newly relevant, delivering a very, very, very pink summer blockbuster that acknowledges Barbie's baggage, unpacks that baggage and, also, sells that baggage. (The designer-luggage company Béis now offers a Barbie collection.) They wanted Gerwig to burnish Barbie. But why, exactly, did Gerwig want to do that?

Inquiries like this fluster Gerwig. She has been thinking about Barbie, nonstop, for years. But at the time, it had been a while since she'd talked it over with anyone who wasn't already immersed in the project. Suddenly, at the end of a long day, she was being asked to justify the fascination that possessed her the moment Margot Robbie, also one of the movie's producers, asked her about writing the script, which she would do with her partner, Noah Baumbach. ''I kept thinking: Humans are the people that make dolls and then get mad at the dolls,'' Gerwig explained. ''We create them and then they create us and we recreate them and they recreate us. We're in constant conversation with inanimate objects.''

She wanted in on that conversation. Yes, Barbie is a polarizing toy and a juicy hunk of I.P., but Gerwig leaped right to what else Barbie is: a potent, complicated, contradictory symbol that stands near the center of a decades-long and still-running argument about how to be a woman. If there is a kind of earnestness that once would have precluded a director from ''selling out,'' it is the same earnestness that now precludes them from thinking about that notion at all. (What is Barbie but a superhero in heels, older than Spider-Man and Iron Man?) Instead of aiming for a product you might grade on a curve as ''relatively thoughtful, for a Barbie movie,'' Gerwig devoted herself to threading a needle slimmer than the eyelashes painted on the doll's face. The movie is a celebration of Barbie and a subterranean apologia for Barbie. It is a giant corporate undertaking and a strange, funny personal project. It is a jubilant, mercilessly effective polymer-and-pink extravaganza whose guiding star turns out to be Gerwig's own sincerity. ''Things can be both/and,'' she said. ''I'm doing the thing and subverting the thing.''

Gerwig, who turns 40 this summer, loved playing with dolls so much that she did it until she was about 14. In hindsight, this seems like the behavior of a future director, but at the time she felt it was ''too late -- people were already drinking at parties.'' Some of her dolls were Barbies. She can remember, as a little girl, standing in a Toys ''R'' Us, gazing upon a display of Barbies in their really big boxes, wearing their really big dresses, their really big hair fanned out for maximal glamour, and she has tried to hold onto her feeling of never having seen anything more beautiful. While preparing the movie, her creative team considered hundreds of shades of pink, but Gerwig arrived one day convinced that they had let their adult sensibilities lead them astray: The pink had gotten too tasteful. They needed something supersaturated, bold and bright -- not salmon. Nothing about the movie should feel ''like an adult telling a little kid: 'Don't talk too loud. Don't chew with your mouth open.' You wanted it to be that exuberance of using the brightest color in the box.''

But it is not just a child's sensibility at play in ''Barbie.'' Gerwig's mother was not wild about the dolls, so they mostly trickled into the house as hand-me-downs. Even as she was gathering the intimate Barbie experience that's all over this film -- one character is constantly doing splits, as if enacting a sense memory of how ably the dolls hit 180-degree leg extension -- she was also imbibing the critique. ''The one that always felt the most pointed to me was that if she was a human being, she wouldn't be able to hold her head up,'' she recalls; Barbie's neck is, by most estimations, too thin to support her cranium. (The one that always stuck with me was the legend that if Barbie were real, she would have to crawl on all fours, weighed down by her massive mammaries.) ''If you're walking around,'' Gerwig says, ''congratulations, you don't look like Barbie.''

Gerwig understands both the love and the loathing for Barbie, but for many others, the doll remains an either/or proposition: Either she's feminist or she's really, really not. Arguments that she is feminist include the fact that she has had her own Dreamhouse since 1962, when women were routinely denied mortgages and credit cards. She went to the moon years before Neil Armstrong, and unlike any real-life American woman, she has been president. But a couple of years after becoming a homeowner, a Slumber Party Barbie came with a scale locked at 110 pounds and a ''How to Lose Weight'' manual, with the directions ''Don't Eat.'' (Perhaps the most famous Barbie movie before this one was Todd Haynes's breakout short ''Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story,'' which used dolls to stage a biopic about the singer, who died in 1983 of complications from anorexia.) Over the decades, there has been a persistent release of other Yikes Barbies, like the memorable Teen Talk Barbie that was programmed to say, ''Math class is tough!''

More holistically, Barbie was abhorred by second-wave feminists as an inescapable, white, blond, impossibly thin, impossibly stacked, glammed-up personification of the male gaze being pushed on generations of girls as the woman they should aspire to be. Gloria Steinem has said Barbie ''was pretty much everything the feminist movement was trying to escape from.'' A chant rang out at a women's-equality march in 1970: ''I am not a Barbie doll.''

When Robbie approached Gerwig about writing the film, the parameters were extremely broad: She could do anything she wanted. (One thing she really wanted to do was work with Robbie, who, she says, finishes meetings by asking, '' 'Does anyone have anything that they just really hate or want to bring up right now that's really bothering them?' She just, like, runs at danger.'' When Gerwig is quoting Robbie, she puts on an Australian accent, which she is good at.) But even though Mattel was involved, the film couldn't just be Barbie propaganda. It would have to deal with the whole scope of the conversation. ''People say, 'Well, what's the story of Barbie?''' Gerwig recalls. ''The story of Barbie is the fight that's been going on about Barbie.''

As the movie begins, Robbie's Barbie wakes in her Dreamhouse and cheerfully waves to all the other Barbies in their Dreamhouses, which she can do because none of the Dreamhouses have walls. (Barbies have nothing to hide, and nowhere to hide it if they did.) Barbieland is a multicultural Barbiarchy: The president is a Barbie and so are the Supreme Court justices, Nobel Prize winners, pilots, doctors and construction crews. The Kens, in contrast, have one job, the frustratingly ill-defined ''Beach,'' where they cheerlead and jockey in hopes of being noticed. The Barbies know that they are dolls -- that Mattel created them, that there is a real world where little girls play with them -- but they are otherwise blithely incurious. In Barbieland, every day is a good day, and every night is a girls' night. They imagine that the real world is just like Barbieland and that they have helped us solve all our ''problems of equal rights and feminism.''

Then come those pesky intimations of mortality. Later, a patch of cellulite appears on Barbie's thigh. Her naturally high-heel-ready feet fall flat. These ''malfunctions,'' Barbie is told, are probably a result of someone in the real world playing with her too hard -- and though she does not want to leave Barbieland to investigate, she really does not want cellulite. So with Ken and his Rollerblades in the back seat, and the radio blaring the Indigo Girls' 1989 acoustic anthem ''Closer to Fine'' (a song Gerwig has loved since growing up among ''hippie Christians'' in a Unitarian church), she drives her pink convertible toward reality, expecting a hug and a thank you from the women of America. Instead, a haughty teenager serves her the whole brutal read: Barbie, the plastic personification of ''unrealistic physical ideals, sexualized capitalism and rampant consumerism,'' has been making women feel bad about themselves since she was invented.

''I really thought of it like a spiritual journey,'' Gerwig says. The Barbies live in a world that has ''the comfort of fundamentalism''; there is no death, aging or shame, and ''you never have to wonder what you're meant to do.'' Then cellulite slithers into paradise. The idea that ''you're not going to follow a path that's been laid out for you,'' Gerwig says, ''comes with a fair amount of terror.'' The resonances aren't just religious: This is, as in much Gerwig material, the arc of growing up.

Gerwig brims with references and influences, many of which she marshaled to make the movie ''authentically artificial,'' with everything ''fake, but really fake'' -- make-believe and yet tangible, tactile, like playing with an actual toy. She called Peter Weir, the director of ''The Truman Show,'' to ask how to ''execute something that's both artificial and emotional at the same time.'' She tried to channel musicals like ''The Umbrellas of Cherbourg'' and ''Singin' in the Rain,'' which she says do the same. Many of the special effects were based on the analog techniques of 1959, a year chosen because that's when Barbie debuted. The mermaid Barbies we see splish-splashing behind Jeff Koons-esque plastic waves are being hoisted by a rig like a seesaw. The blue expanse hovering over Barbieland is not green screen; it's a vast backdrop of painted sky.

''Barbie'' has a bigger scope, budget and potential audience than any of Gerwig's previous work. This was part of its appeal: Gerwig has been scaling up, intentionally. And yet she remains focused on characters' baby-stepping into adulthood. (Her next project is a Netflix adaptation of the Narnia universe.) The protagonists she played in ''Frances Ha'' and ''Mistress America'' -- collaborations with Baumbach -- would probably make arch remarks about a Barbie I.P. blockbuster, but they, too, were figuring out who they were. So were the heroines of Gerwig's directorial debut, ''Lady Bird,'' loosely inspired by her own Sacramento childhood, and her follow-up, ''Little Women,'' based on her favorite childhood book.

''Barbie,'' too, is a coming-of-age story; the figure coming of age just happens to be a full-grown piece of plastic. ''Little Women'' would have been a fine alternate title for it. Same with ''Mothers & Daughters,'' a working title for ''Lady Bird.'' For Barbie, as in both those other films, growing up is a matriarchal affair. It is something you do with your mother, your sisters, your aunties. Or, in Barbie's case, with the women threaded through your product history.

In the beginning, there was Ruth Handler, eavesdropping on her daughter, Barbara, playing with paper dolls. As little Barbie Handler and a friend dressed the cutouts in different outfits, they imagined their careers and personalities. Her mother's quite feminist-sounding insight was that there were no three-dimensional dolls that let girls explore being grown women, only baby dolls that encouraged them to practice motherhood.

Handler and her husband, Elliot, were already running Mattel, a toy company they founded in their California garage in 1945. She ran the business, and he came up with the toys. Her proposal for a non-baby doll stalled until, traveling in Switzerland, she came upon a potential prototype. The Bild Lilli was a novelty toy, modeled on a blond vixen from a West German comic strip, that could be used to accessorize a grown man's car, like Playboy-silhouette mud flaps. Handler brought some home as proof of concept. Manufacturers, retailers and even Mattel weren't sure mothers would buy their daughters a toy with such a va-va-voom figure, but the company was advised by a famous Freudian marketing consultant that moms could be neutralized if they thought Barbie was teaching proper comportment. They might not like her sexual precocity, but they would put up with it to have her model mainstream femininity.

In 1959, Barbie, a ''Teenage Fashion Doll'' for 8- to 12-year-old girls, debuted in a black-and-white bathing suit. Soon she would be a fashion editor, nurse, flight attendant, ''executive career girl'' and astronaut, each in an exactingly crafted outfit, down to miniature zippers. Customers wanted her to have a boyfriend, and in 1961, Ken was introduced, named after the Handlers' son. (Wedding dresses had been on sale since 1959.) Now customers wanted Barbie to have a baby.

Little girls can make Barbies play mothers quite seamlessly; almost any toy will do, including Mattel's own Skipper, even though she's supposed to be Barbie's little sister. In all the hundreds of Barbie play sets that have been made, would one with her own child really have upended the fantasy? But Handler was a businesswoman with a complicated relationship to being a housewife -- ''Oh, [expletive], it was awful!'' is a direct quote -- and with what seems like the insistence of someone intimate with the stultification of child-rearing, she put her foot down. In 1963, the same year ''The Feminine Mystique'' was published, Mattel released a ''Barbie Babysits!'' play set instead. That Barbie has never had a child remains one of the most radical things about her.

Mattel had its troubles over the years -- Ruth Handler resigned after financial improprieties that would lead to charges from the Securities and Exchange Commission (she had a second act manufacturing breast prostheses for cancer survivors), and in the 1980s the company took a cash infusion from the junk-bond king Michael Milken -- but it was in the new millennium that Barbie faced existential threats. Namely, mothers began to defect. First a genuine competitor emerged: Bratz dolls dressed provocatively, mostly cared about shopping and had their own bizarre proportions, but they were sassy, fun and multiethnic. (Barbie had introduced Black, Hispanic and ''Oriental'' Barbies by 1981, but these remained secondary to the blond ''close your eyes and picture a Barbie'' Barbie.) By some estimates, Bratz took about a third of Barbie's market share before being hamstrung by Mattel's litigation.

By 2015, after years of declining figures, Barbie hit its lowest sales volume in a quarter century. A psychological study found that after playing with Barbies, girls thought themselves less capable of various careers than they did after playing with a control Mrs. Potato Head. Mattel's own findings were dire: Customers thought the doll was shallow, materialistic, too perfect and not reflective of the world around her. Mothers didn't feel comfortable giving Barbie as a gift at a birthday party. There had never been such fear, among the people who safeguard her, that Barbie might be staring down irrelevance.

So Mattel did something it had never needed to: It changed. In 2015, it began rolling out 100 different skin tones, hair textures, face shapes and eye colors, and four different body types for the flagship doll, which now comes in original, curvy, petite and tall. There has since been the introduction of a Barbie with vitiligo, a Barbie with Down syndrome, a bald Barbie and many others, plus a series modeled on inspiring women like Rosa Parks, Maya Angelou and Billie Jean King.

As Mattel changed, it became clear that the world around Barbie had changed, too. Years of corporate feminism, girl bosses and girl power had defanged the second-wave critique; now feminists could look like anything, and some chose to look like Barbie. The classic blond doll remains a megaseller, but once she was inclusive and aspirational, appearing in animated shorts to tell young girls that overapologizing ''is a learned reflex, and every time we do it, we take away from our self-confidence,'' the whole high-femme thing wasn't such a problem. Mothers started returning to the fold.

When Gerwig visited Mattel's very pink headquarters in El Segundo, Calif., in October 2019 for ''brand immersion,'' she learned about these changes for the first time. She also learned that, unlike when she was a child, there were no longer friend characters in the Barbie Universe. ''All of these women are Barbie, and Barbie is all of these women,'' she remembers the executives telling her. The same went for Ken. ''But this is extraordinary!'' Gerwig remembers thinking. ''This is a very high spiritual work that they've done! You can sort of stumble into poetry, that selfhood is contained amongst all these people.''

She laughed when she told me this, but she was not laughing at it, which is precisely the tone of ''Barbie.'' When working on the sequence in which Barbie's high-heeled foot falls flat, Robbie asked Gerwig how to play that moment: Is it a jolt? Is it painful? Gerwig told her: ''You know that feeling where you're like, 'Huh, did I just get my period?' Make that face.'' Robbie, like everything else in the movie, is perfectly artificial and thoroughly genuine at the same time, flabbergasted by her misbehaving body and the gnarly emotions that come with it. When she shows her feet to her friends, one bellows, ''Flat feet!'' like a panicked bullfrog, and the Barbies all begin to operatically dry heave, with intense, hilariously over-the-top disgust. (The only reason they aren't spewing vomit is that Gerwig and her colleagues decided there are no liquids in Barbieland.) ''If we made fun of it, it falls apart,'' Gerwig says. ''We have to be totally sincere.''

Someone more cynical than Gerwig might have been less moved by Mattel's corporate epiphany, 60 years into existence, that Barbie could sustain being a size 6, but cynicism is clearly not Gerwig's way. After watching ''Tiny Shoulders: Rethinking Barbie,'' the 2018 documentary chronicling Barbie's transformation from the inside of Mattel, she was taken by how anxious the female employees were in the run-up to the public reveal of the doll's updates. ''It's so amazing that they made these strides and yet there's just this impossible gantlet of contradictions you have to be walking all the time,'' she says. ''Did they change it in the right way? Did they do it right? Was it good enough?'' She wanted to home in on this feeling -- that modern womanhood is the perpetual experience of not meeting someone's standards, including your own -- and flip it. ''If Barbie has been a symbol of all the ways we're not enough, the only thing that made sense to me to tackle in the movie was: How could we turn it to be enough?''

After Barbie is eviscerated by that real-world teenager, she's way more distressed than when she left Barbieland. She thought she was adored, but in fact she is disdained, objectified, powerless. This is a lot for a doll, but the movie's gambit is to point out that it is table stakes for a woman. The movie sidesteps whatever role Barbie might play in perpetuating a narrow, idealized femininity; instead it gives this particular Barbie a crash course in modern misogyny. After decades of fretting about girls' wanting to be as perfect as Barbie, Gerwig serves up a Barbie struggling to be as resilient as us. This is the movie's brazen magic trick. Barbie is no longer an avatar of women's insufficiency, a projection of all we're not; instead, she becomes a reflection of how hard -- but worth it -- it is to be all that we are.

Helping Barbie navigate her topsy-turvy new existence are other women. Some are already embedded in her history: Ruth Handler (Rhea Perlman); a mother who used to play with Barbie (America Ferrera); the daughter those Barbies were passed on to (Ariana Greenblatt). But one is a stranger, a woman she notices while she sits on a bench, gathering herself. It's a type of woman she has never seen before, because there are no old women in Barbieland. This woman is played by the 91-year-old, Oscar-winning costume designer Ann Roth, a friend of Gerwig's. (''Do you have many friends who are, like, 90? I do, weirdly. I have three real friends, not pretend friends, who are now 91, 90 and 91.'') When Barbie looks at her, she finds her beautiful and tells her so. The woman already knows. Suddenly Barbie, the fraught aspirational figure, has beheld someone she might aspire to be, and it is a radiantly content nonagenarian, reading a newspaper on a Los Angeles bench, who knows what she's worth.

''The idea of a loving God who's a mother, a grandmother -- who looks at you and says, 'Honey, you're doing OK' -- is something I feel like I need and I wanted to give to other people,'' Gerwig says. When it was suggested that this scene, which Gerwig calls a ''transaction of grace,'' might be cut for time, she remembers thinking: ''If I cut that scene, I don't know why I'm making this movie. If I don't have that scene, I don't know what it is or what I've done.''

Midway through ''Barbie,'' a Mattel employee receives a phone call from the F.B.I.: A Barbie is on the loose. One thing leads to another, and Barbie finds herself racing, action-comedy style, through Mattel headquarters, with the company's entire executive corps in hot pursuit, eager to stuff her back into a life-size version of the pink box new Barbies come in.

As much as this set-piece owes to Gerwig and Baumbach's sly imaginations, it owes something to Mattel too. This is a corporation that has historically been so protective of Barbie that it sued the band Aqua over the pop smash ''Barbie Girl.'' Now there is a Nicki Minaj and Ice Spice collaboration that samples ''Barbie Girl'' on the ''Barbie'' soundtrack. How does a company go from dispensing cease-and-desist letters to gamely lampooning itself?

As with the great Barbie makeover of 2015, the answer has to do with survival. After Barbie's pivot, the brand was on better footing, but its parent company was not. In 2018, Mattel lost $533 million. Revenue had plunged $2 billion in five years, and the company had churned through three chief executives. The fourth was Ynon Kreiz, an Israeli-born businessman with a gleaming white smile, total message discipline and a history working in entertainment, not toys. Kreiz had a vision for a turnaround: Mattel would restructure, cut costs and stop being a toy company. ''We used to think of ourselves and present ourselves as a manufacturing company,'' he told me. ''The specialty was: We make items. Now we are an I.P. company that is managing franchises.''

If these are business-speak talking points, they are also the reason ''Barbie'' exists. Mattel has previously made the kind of predictable entertainments a toy company makes -- straightforward pro-Barbie material like successful animated shows for kids. But when Kreiz took charge, that kind of propaganda was not working broadly enough. He and his colleagues now say the same things over and over. That Barbie is not a toy; she is a pop-culture icon. That she does not have customers; she has fans. If you take that seriously, it outlines how to proceed. An icon who wants to stay at the center of the culture can't keep putting out the same old thing and suing anyone who riffs on it. She has to stay current.

So, six weeks into the job, Kreiz met with Margot Robbie, who had been keeping an eye on the Barbie rights and whose production company had a relationship with Warner Brothers. He also hired a veteran film producer, Robbie Brenner, who had made movies like ''Dallas Buyers Club,'' to head up Mattel films. Brenner has since assembled a master list of 45 Mattel properties that could be adapted, including Hot Wheels, He-Man, Polly Pocket and Uno; a number are currently in development, with talent including Tom Hanks, Daniel Kaluuya and Lena Dunham.

As Kreiz is quick to point out, using I.P. to drive a business is not an original strategy. Look at Disney, an I.P. company that sells loads of toys. (Mattel, despite no longer thinking of itself as a ''manufacturing company,'' has the contract to produce Disney Princess toys.) Look at the closest thing ''Barbie'' has to a blueprint: ''The Lego Movie,'' which has grossed $468 million. (It, too, features toys reckoning with the ways in which they're being played.) Look at Hasbro and the ''Transformers'' franchise (while averting your eyes from ''Battleship''). Look, even, at Mattel, back before Kreiz came aboard. A Barbie movie had been in development, with Universal and then Sony, since 2009, around the time Mattel allowed Barbie to appear in Pixar's ''Toy Story 3.'' But the project always fell through, even with talent like Anne Hathaway and Amy Schumer attached. In Schumer's script, Barbie was an inventor kicked out of Barbieland for not being perfect enough. Schumer has said she knew the Sony project wouldn't work after she got a note suggesting that the invention that gets Barbie exiled ought to be Jell-O high heels.

Despite Mattel's attempt to adopt a cucumber-cool corporate attitude for Gerwig's ''Barbie,'' it still did plenty of internal white-knuckling. There was consternation over the innuendos about Ken's sexual orientation, and it's not as if they didn't notice the film joking about the company's male leadership. (Will Ferrell, playing the chief executive, defends himself as ''the nephew of a female aunt.'') ''Oh, my God, did I have anxiety,'' says Richard Dickson, the president and chief operating officer, who has been at the company for almost 20 years. When he read the part of the script where the teenager eviscerates Barbie, he says, he was sure it needed to be different. They had done so much work to put this critique behind them; why bring it up? After weeks of discussion, he reached out to Gerwig. He and a group of executives flew to London, where the movie was being filmed. His attitude on arriving, he says, was, ''like: 'This page is changing! We can rewrite it right here!''' But after watching Gerwig and Robbie read the scene, he says, ''I was so embarrassed.'' Acknowledging the critique and co-signing the critique, he saw, were not the same. It's one thing to insult a plastic doll sold by a giant corporation, but it's quite another to throw those words into Margot Robbie's wide-eyed face. Gerwig has, literally, humanized Barbie. And Barbie, the big-hearted naïf, is brought to tears by all the unexpectedly harsh things humans think about her.

Everyone at Mattel adores the movie. They are using it to slather Barbie -- the icon, not just the product -- across the globe. This movie is full of lovingly showcased dolls, accessories, outfits, speedboats and tandem bicycles; there is a parade of short-lived dolls from Barbie history, like Earring Magic Ken, and the Barbie with a TV embedded in her back, and the Skipper whose breasts grew when you moved her arms. Yet many of these items are not available anywhere but eBay. The movie is dream product placement, but you cannot buy many of the products it places. It is Barbie the concept that is inescapable: Barbie pink, ''Barbie'' merch, Barbie tie-ins, Barbie licensing partnerships for rugs, candles, nail polish, frozen yogurt, pool floats, insurance and video-game consoles.

This is the bet: that a good movie will drive near-infinite brand synergies. It will make other talent keen to work in the Mattel Cinematic Universe. It will expand Barbie's demographic appeal. It will launder the doll and her content universe for naysayers and those still on the fence. It will make Barbie so omnipresent that children will turn to the adults in their life and say, ''I want a Barbie doll,'' and the adults will not wince. Kreiz is very clear on this: If the movie works, it will sell toys. That just couldn't be the starting point. People would see through it. So Mattel let Gerwig toy with its crown property, teasing the corporate mothership and winking at Ken's sexual orientation, and in exchange it got a movie that should serve its purposes better than any advertisement ever could.

We have come this far without attending to Ken, which is the predicament of Ken. While I was working on this article, I had Barbie books scattered around the house, and whenever my 6-year-old daughter saw a picture of Ken, she would push the book away in disgust and say, ''EWWWWW, KEN!'' When Gerwig first spoke with Ryan Gosling about playing the role, he told her that his daughters had a Ken and that he once found it beneath a rotting lemon. Both of these things are very Ken.

In the funhouse-mirror world that is Barbieland, Barbies have all the power, and the Kens are their accessories. Not to put too fine a point on it, but: Kens are the women of Barbieland. It's just that no one is objectifying them, because no one has the genitalia to make lust a thing. Ken would like a chaste good-night kiss anyway, but Barbie would prefer he leave, so he always does. When Ken hitches a ride into the real world, his experience is as eye-opening as Barbie's. She learns how difficult it is to be a woman. He learns how great it is to be a man. Ken gets red-pilled on patriarchy.

Gosling spent a year demurring about the role. ''There were times where I was sure I wasn't doing the film,'' he recalls. ''I would call my agent and ask who was playing Ken. And they would say, 'Greta says you are.''' Eventually he committed: ''She was just, in the end, more confident that I should play him than I was that I shouldn't.'' During that year of talking and the preparation that followed, it became clear that Ken needed an additional beat, some catharsis that wasn't in the script. If you are making a movie that is trying to take the contradictions of modern womanhood seriously and you have a character in your movie who cannot define himself or understand his own worth -- a character who kicks sand all day hoping just to be looked at by someone with power -- you have to take that plight seriously, even if the character is male. You don't have to do this because Mattel or Warner Brothers is insisting. You have to do this because the movie is insisting.

So it became clear: Ken needed a dream dance number. (Gerwig shrugs: ''I like dream ballets, and I like mothers.'') She has a habit of referring to ''Barbie'' as a musical, and that's not wildly inaccurate: It has a soundtrack, overseen by Mark Ronson, of original pop songs, and another big choreographed dance number besides Ken's. Gerwig screened musicals for the entire cast, and she thinks of the Mattel executives in the movie as being something like tuxedo-clad 1930s tap dancers. But there is only one character who breaks out into a power ballad, and it is Ken. ''I'm just Ken/Anywhere else I'd be a 10,'' Gosling wails as he heads to a Ken-on-Ken beach battle that leads to a Ken-and-Ken dream ballet that ultimately allows Ken to realize that he is ''Kenough.''

It is not a coincidence that the moment Gerwig singled out as always surprising her -- the one that makes her think, ''why did they let us do this?'' -- is the one that involves the Kens riding their invisible horses to their Mojo Dojo Casa Houses, after the dream ballet, after they have stormed the Barbieland beach and fought with lacrosse sticks and suction-cup arrows. It is in those moments that the movie has most completely slipped the bounds of anything a Barbie movie needed to do, shooting past the critique, and the subversion of the critique, and the upending, sidestepping, teasing and embracing of the critique, to go off into its own orbit. Liftoff has been achieved. Ken has momentarily run away with the picture.

''Barbie'' is a gigantic endeavor with hundreds of stakeholders and thousands of details, every single one of which has been obsessed over. (I haven't even told you about Barbieland's seven suns, so no one is ever in shadow, or Ken's black leather fringe vest and fanny pack with ''Ken'' emblazoned on it in the Metallica font!) This movie is a big, honking summer tent pole that has been finessed into a gulp of delectable entertainment that hits every single one of its marks. But the surprising thing about ''Barbie'' is not that it pulls off the difficult task of doing everything it needed to do; it's that it does something it didn't need to at all: It feels as if it was made by an actual person.

Yes, that person has her cake and eats it, too, dozens of times over, in this film. It's in how ''Barbie'' name-checks ''rampant consumerism'' as a sin and then makes every piece of plastic gleam so gorgeously that it feels as if the Pacific Garbage Patch might be worth it. It's in how Barbieland is full of insidious flaws -- it's literally a panopticon -- and yet it's going to sell a billion Dreamhouses. It's in how the movie insists that everyone is beautiful but contains no one even slightly plain. It's in how the movie speaks directly to women, mothers in particular, about the impossibility of perfection, so we can feel great about buying perfect Barbies for our babies. But maybe the most unexpected is that at the end of this movie, which will most likely glorify this doll for generations to come, Barbie finds herself echoing with her critics. Like those 1970s feminists, she does not want to be a perfect, plastic doll, however difficult it may be to live outside a box.

Gerwig loves Barbie, but she knows Barbie has made people feel bad, as if they don't measure up. And so she has made this 113-minute love letter to Barbie that is also an earnest attempt to make amends. This is the most subversive thing about the movie, this extratextual notion that Barbie might have things to make amends for. There is no reason Gerwig in particular should be the one trying to make those amends, except that she wanted to -- to take an immense, divisive toy brand and bend it to the heartfelt and counterintuitive purpose of making women feel good.

It's a testament to Gerwig's singular earnestness -- a level of sincerity unavailable to many of us -- that using Barbie to affirm the worth of ordinary women feels, to her, quasi religious. She told me that when she was growing up, her Christian family's closest friends were observant Jews; they vacationed together and constantly tore around each other's homes. She would also eat with them on Friday nights for Shabbat dinner, where blessings were sung in Hebrew, including over the children at the table. May God bless you and protect you. May God show you favor and be gracious to you. May God show you kindness and grant you peace. Every Friday the family's father would rest his hand on Gerwig's head, just as he did on his own children's, and bless her too.

''I remember feeling the sense of, 'Whatever your wins and losses were for the week, whatever you did or you didn't do, when you come to this table, your value has nothing to do with that,''' Gerwig told me. '' 'You are a child of God. I put my hand over you, and I bless you as a child of God at this table. And that's your value.' I remember feeling so safe in that and feeling so, like, enough.'' She imagines people going to the temple of the movies to see ''Barbie'' on a hot summer day, sitting in the air-conditioned dark, feeling transported, laughing, maybe crying, and then coming out into the bright heat. ''I want people to feel like I did at Shabbat dinner,'' she said. ''I want them to get blessed.''

Stylist: Valentina Collado; prop stylist: Ariana Salvato; hair: Rutger; makeup: Francelle Daly; clothing: Isabel Marant, the Row, Proenza Schouler.

## The Renters' Utopia.

Francesca Mari and Luca Locatelli | May 23 | NYTMag

*Francesca Mari is a contributing writer for the magazine and an assistant professor of the practice in the literary-arts department at Brown University. She writes about all aspects of housing. Luca Locatelli is a photographer whose work focuses on environmental images and solutions to the climate crisis. He has been working on ''The Circular Economy,'' an immersive project premiering in September at the Gallerie d'Italia museum of Turin, Italy.*

When Eva Schachinger married at 22, she applied for public housing. Luckily, she lived in Vienna, which has some of the best public housing in the world. It was 1968. Eva was a teacher, and her husband, Klaus-Peter, was an accountant for the city's public-transportation system. She grew up in a public-housing complex in the center of the city, where her grandmother, who cared for her from 6 in the morning until 6 at night, lived in one of five buildings arranged around a courtyard. Eva played all day with friends from the complex.

Her mother, who was renting on the private market after a divorce, had recently applied for public housing, too, and she was offered a unit first, in 1971. By then, Eva had a young daughter, and her mother decided Eva needed the spot more and offered it to her. The available unit was in the 21st District, on the northeastern edge of the city. Eva's father-in-law warned her -- not entirely jokingly -- that out there, they would be the first to be occupied by the Russians. But she and Klaus-Peter liked the floor plan: Although the apartment was an economical 732 square feet, it had two bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, a toilet and washroom and a balcony. The rent was 700 schillings. (That's about 55 euros, though the currency wasn't introduced until 2002.) Eva transferred her teaching job to the 21st District, to a school a 15-minute walk from her new apartment.

When I met Eva late last year, she looked smart in a jean jacket with a neatly tied silk scarf around her neck, small dangly earrings and cropped curly hair. Over the course of the last 44 years, as she continued to teach English to fifth through eighth grades, Eva's rent increased almost fivefold, to 270 euros from 55, but her wages increased more than 20-fold, to 3,375 euros a month from 150. Viennese law dictates that rents in public housing can increase only with inflation, and only when the year's inflation exceeds 5 percent. By the time she retired in 2007, Eva's rent was only 8 percent of her income. Because her husband was earning 4,000 euros a month, their rent amounted to 3.6 percent of their incomes combined.

That's about what Vienna was aiming for back in 1919, when the city began planning its world-famous municipal housing, known as the Gemeindebauten. Before World War I, Vienna had some of the worst housing conditions in Europe, Eve Blau notes in her book, ''The Architecture of Red Vienna.'' Many working-class families had to take on subtenants or bed tenants (day and night workers who slept in the same bed at different times) in order to pay their rent. But from 1923 to 1934, in a period known as Red Vienna, the ruling Social Democratic Party built 64,000 new units in 400 housing blocks, increasing the city's housing supply by about 10 percent. Some 200,000 people, one-tenth of the population, were rehoused in these buildings, with rents set at 3.5 percent of the average semiskilled worker's income, enough to cover the cost of maintenance and operation.

Experts refer to Vienna's Gemeindebauten as ''social housing,'' a phrase that captures how the city's public housing and other limited-profit housing are a widely shared social benefit: The Gemeindebauten welcome the middle class, not just the poor. In Vienna, a whopping 80 percent of residents qualify for public housing, and once you have a contract, it never expires, even if you get richer. Housing experts believe that this approach leads to greater economic diversity within public housing -- and better outcomes for the people living in it.

In 2015, before they bought an apartment on the private market, the Schachingers were making about 80,000 euros ($87,000) a year, roughly the income of the average U.S. household in 2021. Eva and Klaus-Peter paid 26 percent and 29 percent in income tax, respectively, but just 4 percent of their pretax income was going toward rent, which is about what the average American household spends on meals eaten out and half a percentage point less than what the average American spends on ''entertainment.'' Even if the Schachingers got a new contract today on their unit, their monthly payments would be an estimated 542 euros, or only 8 percent of their income. Vienna's generous supply of social housing helps keep costs down for everyone: In 2021, Viennese living in private housing spent 26 percent of their post-tax income on rent and energy costs, on average, which is only slightly more than the figure for social-housing residents overall (22 percent). Meanwhile, 49 percent of American renters -- 21.6 million people -- are cost-burdened, paying landlords more than 30 percent of their pretax income, and the percentage can be even higher in expensive cities. In New York City, the median renter household spends a staggering 36 percent of its pretax income on rent.

To American eyes, the whole Viennese setup can appear fancifully socialistic. But set that aside, and what's mind-boggling is how social housing gives the economic lives of Viennese an entirely different shape. Imagine if your housing expenses were more like the Schachingers'. Imagine having to think about them to the same degree that you think about your restaurant choices or streaming-service subscriptions. Imagine, too, where the rest of your income might go, if you spent much less of it on housing. Vienna invites us to envision a world in which homeownership isn't the only way to secure a certain future -- and what our lives might look like as a result.

Writing about housing in the United States, I've become depressed. I'm the scold at the dinner party, revolted by big investors speculating in the housing market, yes, but also by the thousands of small-time investors -- including some of my own friends -- who are pooling money to buy homes in states they've never seen or buying rental properties in gentrifying neighborhoods. But the math is hard to argue with. Buying a home near work is more lucrative than working. The growth of asset values has outstripped returns on labor for four decades, and a McKinsey report found that a majority of those assets -- 68 percent -- is real estate. Last year, one in four home sales was to someone who had no intention of living in it. These investors are particularly incentivized to buy the sorts of homes most needed by first-time buyers: Inexpensive properties generate the highest rental-income cash flows.

Real estate is a place where money literally grows on tree beams. In the last decade, the typical owner of a single-family home acquired nearly $200,000 in appreciation. ''Another word for asset appreciation is inflation,'' the academics Lisa Adkins, Melinda Cooper and Martijn Konings write in ''The Asset Economy,'' ''an increase in monetary value without any corresponding change in the nature of the good itself or the conditions of its production that would make it scarcer or justify an increased demand for it.'' That inflation is creating a treacherous gulch between the housing haves and have-nots. Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies found that, in 2019, the median net worth of U.S. renters was just 2.5 percent of the median net worth of homeowners: $6,270 versus $254,900. Last year, as higher interest rates slowed home sales and caused prices to plateau (and even soften in some overheated cities), the asking price of the median U.S. rental reached $2,000 a month, a record high, according to Redfin. Inflated rent prices line the pockets of landlords while preventing renters from saving for a down payment and ever getting off the treadmill.

The astronomical pace of appreciation is the culmination of decades of policy aimed at encouraging home buying. The fixed-rate, 30-year mortgage is a particularly American invention, possible only because the federal government insures the debt -- if a borrower defaults, the government is on the hook. (Only one other country, Denmark, offers the same instrument.) Then there's our tax code, which allows those affluent enough to buy homes and itemize their deductions to write off the interest they pay on their mortgages: the bigger the mortgage, the bigger the deduction. Homeowners can deduct up to $10,000 of their property taxes from their federal taxes too, and if they sell their primary residence, they may be able to avoid paying capital gains on profits of up to $250,000 per person ($500,000 for couples). As housing activists like to point out, everyone who has a mortgage is living in subsidized housing.

Last year, troubled by the seeming intractability of these problems, I began looking for solutions outside the United States. Could the answer be rent control, as in Berlin? It might have seemed that way a decade or so ago, before investors and new residents began pouring into the city, causing land values to quintuple; now, despite rent-stabilization laws, even the apartments that no one else wanted to buy 15 years ago are huge moneymakers. Many residents with affordable rental contracts are locked into them because it would be too expensive or competitive to move. Frustrated by the housing squeeze, tenant organizers recently put forth an ''expropriation'' measure, which called for landlords with more than 3,000 units to sell their holdings back to the government at below-market prices. In a 2021 referendum, 59 percent of Berliners voted in favor of it, but it's not clear whether it will ever be implemented.

Could the answer be loosening zoning restrictions, as Tokyo did in 2002? That has certainly helped. In 2014, there was more home construction in the city than in all of England. Since then, home prices have stabilized. Tokyo is largely celebrated as a model by YIMBYs (members of the ''yes, in my backyard'' movement) because they like its market-driven approach to housing abundance. They often point out that the city builds five times as much housing per capita as California. But Japan is a very different market because of its earthquake risk: Because regulatory codes and mitigation technologies are ever improving, structures often fully depreciate within 35 years. Older homes are often undermaintained because there's little expectation that any investment might be recaptured upon resale; they're thought of like used clothing or cars -- you resell at a loss.

Auckland, New Zealand, might seem like a more applicable example. In 2016, the city, which has one of the most expensive housing markets in the world, ''upzoned'' 75 percent of its residential land, increasing its legal capacity for housing by about 300 percent in an effort to encourage multifamily-housing construction and tamp down prices. In areas that were upzoned, the total number of building permits granted (a way of estimating new construction) more than quadrupled from 2016 to 2021. As intended, the relative value of underdeveloped land increased, because it could suddenly host more housing, and the relative value of units in densely developed areas decreased, tempering sky-high prices. But there are limits to what upzoning can do. Often the benefits of allowing greater density are captured by developers, who price the new units far above cost. It doesn't offer renters security or directly create the type of housing most needed: affordable housing.

That's what differentiates Vienna. Perhaps no other developed city has done more to protect residents from the commodification of housing. In Vienna, 43 percent of all housing is insulated from the market, meaning the rental prices reflect costs or rates set by law -- not ''what the market will bear'' or what a person with no other options will pay. The government subsidizes affordable units for a wide range of incomes. The mean gross household income in Vienna is 57,700 euros a year, but any person who makes under 70,000 euros qualifies for a Gemeindebau unit. Once in, you never have to leave. It doesn't matter if you start earning more. The government never checks your salary again. Two-thirds of the city's rental housing is covered by rent control, and all tenants have just-cause eviction protections. Such regulations, when coupled with adequate supply, give renters a level of stability comparable to American owners with fixed mortgages. As a result, 80 percent of all households in Vienna choose to rent.

The key difference is that Vienna prioritizes subsidizing construction, while the United States prioritizes subsidizing people, with things like housing vouchers. One model focuses on supply, the other on demand. Vienna's choice illustrates a fundamental economic reality, which is that a large-enough supply of social housing offers a market alternative that improves housing for all.

One afternoon last fall, I walked through central Vienna, past ornate buildings with lacy balconies, balustrades and porticos -- private apartments from the 19th century. They were interspersed with social-housing blocks from the 1920s and 1930s -- the Gemeindebauten, which stood out not only for their modernist architecture but also for the triumphant red block lettering on their facades, announcing: Erbaut von der Gemeinde Wien in den Jahren 1925-1926 aus den Mitteln der Wohnbausteuer. (''Built by the municipality of Vienna in the years 1925-1926 from funds from the housing tax.'') A stroke of political genius, I thought, as I waited for the tram: explanation and advertising. Half an hour later, I was in the 21st District, the ''Russian territory'' where Eva Schachinger used to live. Wohnpartner, the city agency that tries to foster community within the Gemeindebauten and helps resolve tenant conflicts, was having an open house at her old building, a flat, minimalist complex with orange elevator shafts.

Following Wohnpartner signs, I found the glass-walled community center and entered. Most of the attendees were mothers with small children or retired people. There was a painting station, table tennis and a plant exchange. People had brought their secondhand goods to give away, and a millennial Wohnpartner staff member offered tech help, which, surprisingly, no one seemed to need. Among the permanent fixtures was a library filled with free books and a play area with an array of wooden toys.

I took a seat with Eva in the communal kitchen, where someone had made a large pot of butternut-squash soup. (Some of Red Vienna's planners had hoped to centralize cooking in communal facilities with industrial-strength machines, but the fascists came first, and then, under capitalism, Austrian families quickly became accustomed to shelling out for their own KitchenAids, Vitamixes and Nespresso machines.) Since retiring, Eva has been collaborating with Malyuun Badeed, the building's caretaker, on a twice-yearly magazine for the complex that includes a recipe and a crossword, along with the latest community news. Badeed, who joined us in the kitchen, wore a black hijab with pearls and waved her hands as she spoke of leaving Somalia as a single mother in the 1990s. When she first arrived in Vienna, she hawked newspapers on the street; now she helped produce one.

Eva told me she often came back to the Gemeindebau to tutor students from the complex with a woman named Edith, an elderly neighbor who lived in a nearby Gemeindebau. Edith's next-door neighbors help buy and deliver her groceries, which she has difficulty carrying. In exchange, she watches over their three children. When Eva called to wish her a merry Christmas, Edith was busy wrapping 40 presents for the three kids; she hid them around her apartment so they wouldn't be found before Santa came to visit. ''The Gemeindebau is where socialization happens,'' Eva was fond of telling me, and this is what socialization looks like across the generations.

I learned that the average waiting time to get a Gemeindebau is about two years (at any given moment there are 12,000 or so people on the waiting list, and each year about 10,000 or more people are housed). Vienna residents -- anyone who has had a fixed address for two years, whether they are a citizen or not -- may apply, and applications are evaluated based on need. Florian Kogler, a 21-year-old university student, was considered an urgent case because he lived in an overcrowded two-bedroom apartment with his mother, stepfather and two siblings. He shared a room with his brother, while his parents slept in the living room. He also got priority because he was moving into his own apartment for the first time. Kogler was offered an apartment in about a month. ''That's unusually fast,'' he told me.

Applicants may decline up to two units; if they decline a third, they have to apply again. Kogler took the first flat offered to him, a 355-square-foot studio drenched in light overlooking a playground in the central 12th District. It cost 350 euros a month; his monthly income from working part time at a museum is about 1,000 euros. Those who need extra assistance to pay their rent receive individual subsidies. Students under 25, like Kogler, can qualify for 200 euros a month.

Every few years, there is a debate about whether the affluent should be forced to give up their Gemeindebau leases -- that is, whether the units should be means-tested. The face of this debate, for some, is Peter Pilz, a former member of Austria's Green Party in Parliament. Pilz lives in Goethehof, one of the largest Gemeindebauten by the Danube River. He moved into a unit as a university student to live with his grandmother, who had been there since the building opened in 1932. Before she died, he took over her contract. (He was, one might say, grandmothered in.) Pilz was elected to Parliament in 1986 and eventually started making more than 8,000 euros a month.

Even in Vienna, Pilz's tenancy raised eyebrows, making headlines in Austria's conservative paper, Ùsterreich, which claimed in 2012 that he was paying only 66.18 euros a month in rent. (Pilz says he was paying, including building costs, closer to 250 euros a month.) ''Given that Pilz's income is well over the usual tariff for social housing, it does look like we're talking about social fraud here,'' said the general secretary of the conservative Freedom Party of Austria.

Pilz did nothing illegal. Once in a Gemeindebau, you never have to leave. But is it unethical for the wealthy to stay? City housing officials point out that having wealthier tenants in the Gemeindebauten helps thwart the problems that accompany concentrated poverty, creating a more stable, healthier environment for everyone. Unlike in the United States, where public housing is only for the poorest -- the average resident's annual household income was $15,219 in 2019, well below the federal poverty line of $16,910 for a family of two -- the relative integration of the Gemeindebauten means that they are not stigmatized.

That's not to say they are problem-free. Noomi Anyanwu, the 23-year-old founder of Black Voices Austria, told me that she grew up in a Gemeindebau with an Austrian mother and a Nigerian father. When she wasn't more than 5, a white boy in the complex who was a bit older called her brother a racial slur while everyone was playing in the courtyard. Overhearing the spat, the fathers descended into the courtyard. But the white father didn't apologize; he doubled down, repeating what his son said. Just a few years later, Anyanwu said, her father left the country because of employment discrimination and racist treatment by the police.

So I was surprised when Anyanwu told me that, on the whole, her experience with social housing was positive. The Gemeindebau was its own village within the city, she said. She estimated that 50 percent of her Gemeindebau neighbors were immigrants -- ''it reflected society,'' she told me. (Vienna actually has a slightly higher percentage of foreign-born residents than New York City.) A girl her age named Safiya lived in an apartment across the hall from hers and would become her best friend. Safiya's father was also from Africa -- from Somalia -- and he, too, left because of racism. But the affordability of the Gemeindebau allowed the girls' mothers to maintain stability.

Esra Ozmen, the daughter of Turkish immigrants, grew up in Sandleitenhof, one of the largest Geimendebauten, which has villa-like courtyards and stonework. As an adult, she moved into her own Gemeindebau studio. Ozmen says affordable housing gave her the stability to study for a Ph.D. in fine art while also pursuing a rap career. She makes 1,000 to 2,000 euros a month from her shows and from organizing cultural events. ''I have a car,'' she told me. ''A Mercedes A-Class from the '90s. I eat out. I drink one coffee out every day. I don't have a lot of money. But I live rich.''

Social housing like Vienna's might seem inconceivable in America. But American politicians seriously considered it in the 1930s. After the stock-market crash of 1929, the U.S. housing market also collapsed; half of mortgage debt was in default by 1933. Both the right and the left agreed that the government needed to intervene. The question was how. According to the historian Kenneth T. Jackson in his book ''Crabgrass Frontier,'' at the time, the typical mortgage ranged from five to 10 years, and borrowers paid interest only until the end of the term, when full payment was due or a borrower refinanced. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933, Congress created the Home Owners' Loan Corporation to buy underwater mortgages and stabilize the housing market. Within two years, the H.O.L.C. restructured more than a million mortgages, covering 10 percent of all owner-occupied homes. Principal and interest were bundled together so that over about 20 years of manageable payments, borrowers became outright homeowners.

But that wasn't enough to salvage the real estate market or the economy. During the Great Depression, one-quarter of all Americans were unemployed, and the construction industry was hit particularly hard. The United States needed the same things as Vienna at the time: employment and better housing conditions for workers. Housing is ''the wheel within the wheel to move the whole economic engine,'' said Marriner Eccles, Roosevelt's Federal Reserve chairman. The Federal Public Works Administration, an emergency jobs program, funded construction of about 50 new public-housing complexes, including the Harlem River Houses in New York City, a project seemingly straight out of Vienna, with Beaux-Arts-inspired buildings along a central courtyard with a nursery school, health clinics and a public library.

Although this housing was admired, it was costly and mired in controversy, writes the historian Gail Radford, who chronicles the New Deal-era debate over social housing in her book, ''Modern Housing for America.'' Roosevelt sought a housing plan that didn't require the government to keep footing the bill. At a time when Communism was gaining traction, he preferred to wed Americans to capitalism. The best way to do that? Broaden the base of homeowners -- increase the number of Americans with a personal investment in property.

Congress's National Housing Act of 1934 would rescue the housing market and establish the housing policy that defines America today. It made permanent the fixed-rate, long-term mortgage that the H.O.L.C. had helped introduce. Banks were reluctant to assume risk over decades, so the act created the Federal Housing Administration (F.H.A.) to insure mortgage debt with the full backing of the U.S. Treasury as long as loans conformed to standards it set -- for instance, homes had to appraise for the purchase price and had to be in a stable-enough neighborhood, which meant a white-enough neighborhood, to make sure the government wouldn't lose money if a borrower defaulted. On its maps, the F.H.A. colored the neighborhoods deemed too risky for mortgage insurance in red -- a form of ''redlining,'' a policy that did a great deal to create the grave racial disparities in wealth that persist today. ''No agency of the United States government has had a more pervasive and powerful impact on the American people over the past half-century,'' Jackson writes.

But the Federal Housing Administration had no plan to address low-income housing needs. So Senator Robert Wagner, a New York Democrat, introduced a second bill, inspired by what the housing scholar Catherine Bauer had seen in Vienna and other European cities. As proposed, the Housing Act of 1937, which Bauer helped write, would have included financing for the construction of both limited-profit housing and public housing. Faced with fierce opposition from the real estate industry, Wagner and Bauer accepted five fatal compromises in order to pass the bill. First, support for nonprofit and limited-profit cooperatives was eliminated. Second, location decisions were left to local governments, many of whose constituents greeted public housing like the bubonic plague, as one commenter put it. Third, a provision was added for an ''equivalent elimination'' of slum property, meaning that for each new unit built, a slum dwelling had to be cleared. (That way, public housing wouldn't dampen landlords' profits by increasing the overall supply of units.) Fourth, public housing would be eligible only to those so poor that they could never secure decent housing in the private market.

Fifth and finally, construction costs were severely limited. The problem with America's public housing today isn't just that it's underfunded and poorly maintained. It's that it wasn't built well to begin with. Doors were left off closets; interior walls were thin and cheap. At a public-housing complex in Red Hook, Brooklyn, the elevator only stopped on every other floor. As Radford writes, ''Those who hated public housing remained hostile, while the minimal buildings produced by the [United States Housing Authority] attracted no new allies and discouraged some of the old ones.'' Indeed, America's public housing was designed to fail: to be unappealing to anyone who could afford to rent.

As Bauer predicted early on, housing programs targeting only the poor would lack the political support necessary to thrive. Only an integrated program, one that welcomed the majority like the Gemeindebau of Vienna, would be sustainable. But the U.S. government prioritized support for banking rather than construction. The 30-year mortgage was a huge economic boon for the millions of Americans who took one out, benefiting from the federal subsidies and the nation's long upward trajectory in home prices; the instrument leveraged many a renter and public-housing resident into homeownership and ''turned many a former dependent of the public sector into a small-time fiscal conservative,'' as Adkins, Cooper and Konings write in ''The Asset Economy.''

This constituency of middle-class homeowners is what the Dartmouth emeritus economist William A. Fischel calls ''homevoters'': a coalition of Americans who -- consciously or not -- vote to protect the value of their property. They tend to oppose local development and favor exclusionary zoning -- which ensures maximum appreciation and prevents their tax dollars from extending to poorer neighborhoods. This tendency, alongside stagnant wages, has transformed the nation's housing stock into an ever-scarcer and ever-more-expensive class of speculative asset. It's almost impossible to ''cater to the expectations of an existing constituency of middle-class homeowners without raising the barriers of entry for the rest of society,'' Adkins and her colleagues write. ''A middle-class politics of asset democratization has ended up undermining the conditions of its own viability.''

I wasn't the only American looking to Vienna for possible answers to America's housing crisis. I was there following a delegation from New York that had come to study the city's housing system -- 50 policymakers, researchers and activists invited by Housing Justice for All, an alliance of housing organizers across the state, and the Action Lab, a social-movement hub. One afternoon, I joined them on a tour of Karl-Marx-Hof, one of the largest housing complexes in the world.

Ever since Karl-Marx-Hof opened in 1930, it has been a sort of Rorschach test -- a domineering socialist monstrosity or a pioneering communitarian stronghold, depending on your political perspective. Exiting the subway station, the building shot up before me, seven stories tall and three-quarters of a mile long, a perimeter block that looks like a citadel. The core of the building is cream-colored, but its sandstone red elements draw the eye -- red balconies and red towers topped by staffs that can fly enormous banners that are visible miles away. Its six huge arched passageways, also red, give the complex the civic stature of an aqueduct.

Julia Anna Schranz, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Vienna and our guide, wore Converse, jeans and a long red wool coat. She pointed out four grim ceramic figures mounted on top of the archways, explaining that they were personifications of enlightenment, freedom, welfare and physical culture. These embellishments -- commissions to increase employment during the period between the world wars, were also seen as an investment in the aesthetics of the Gemeindebauten and a tribute to its tenants.

Schranz opened the thick, thorny iron gates spanning one archway, and we passed into a grassy courtyard -- nearly two football fields in size. Painted an off-white that glowed in the morning sun, the interior was a striking contrast with the more formidable exterior.

''These are the projects,'' India Walton, a community organizer from Buffalo, said wryly. There was a rose garden. Children -- Black, brown, white -- were running and shrieking in a playground attached to an on-site kindergarten. Walton, now in her 40s, had twins when she was just 19 and raised them while working as a nurse. Decades later, she became politically active, and in 2021 she won the Democratic nomination for mayor of Buffalo, only to be defeated by a write-in campaign by the Democratic incumbent. Where would she be now if she had the option of living in a place like this? She would have left her marriage sooner, Walton told me. ''I might not have been a nurse, but a doctor.'' A child in the kindergarten waved at her, and she waved back.

When Karl-Marx-Hof opened, it housed 5,000 people in 1,400 apartments. These apartments were coveted. ''It had two central laundries, two communal bathing facilities with tubs and showers, a dental clinic, maternity clinic, a health-insurance office, library, youth hostel, post office, and a pharmacy and 25 other commercial premises, including a restaurant and the offices and showroom of the BEST, the city-run furnishing and interior-design advice center,'' Blau writes.

Now fewer than 3,000 tenants live in Karl-Marx-Hof -- not because it's undesirable but because living standards have improved and, in response, Vienna has allotted tenants more space. Vienna's housing authority believes that a family of four needs around 1,100 square feet, so it combined some of the units to create larger ones.

A bobblehead nodded from a balcony with potted plants and cairns. An older Austrian man waved. State Assemblywoman Emily Gallagher, a Democrat who had recently unseated the incumbent Democrat in the 50th Assembly District, which includes parts of Greenpoint, Williamsburg and Fort Greene, live-tweeted the tour on her phone. State Senator Julia Salazar, a Democrat representing the 18th State Senate District, which covers Bushwick, took notes with a gold pen on a notebook with black paper. Renette Bradley, a tenant organizer, wore a Nickelodeon shirt, overalls, a black New York beanie and lavishly long fake lashes. ''Can you be paroled here?'' she asked, her voice husky and direct. This affected many of Bradley's friends and relatives who, upon release from prison, were left homeless because they weren't allowed to join family living in public housing.

Schranz looked at her blankly.

''Can you come out of prison and live here?'' Bradley repeated.

''Of course,'' Schranz said. ''Why not? If you're out, you're out.''

The New Yorkers murmured. Schranz continued to look at us questioningly.

''There's like four or five problems baked into that question that they just don't understand,'' Joseph Loonam, a housing campaign coordinator with VOCAL-NY, said as we walked toward the laundry facilities. He told me that a member of his organization had been arrested more than 40 times because whenever he visits his family in the Gowanus projects, he violates the terms of his plea deal.

At the museum store, I bought a red potholder crocheted by a local women's co-op: a Red Vienna-era schema of the ''three evils'' seizing Europe (Nazism, Communism, monarchism), each represented by white arrows. Several organizers and state legislators bought one, too. When the college student working at the museum shop said he was all out, a lawmaker suggested that he could sell the potholders in the display case. ''We aren't used to this,'' the college student said, unlocking the case, by which he seemed to mean American patterns of consumption. The American need to own.

Vienna has succeeded in curbing the craving to own. It has done it by driving down the price of land through rezoning and rent control. In general, the beneficiaries of these land-use policies are less the Gemeindebauten (they stopped building from 2004 to 2015 and now only produce some 500 units a year) and more the limited-profit housing associations, the origins of which preceded Red Vienna and have built 3,000 to 5,000 units a year for the last four decades.

Today limited-profit housing accounts for half the city's social housing. Limited-profit housing associations are restricted to charging rents that reflect costs. Investors -- banks, insurance funds -- may buy shares of the limited-profit housing associations, generally to help fund initial construction. They are paid a low rate of annual interest on their shares. Any profits beyond that must be reinvested in the construction of new social housing. ''It creates a revolving flow of financing for social housing,'' said Justin Kadi, a professor in planning and housing at the University of Cambridge. Vienna's main outlay toward housing is now providing low-cost financing for construction -- and the government gets that money back.

On a gray Friday, Wilhelm Andel, a tall 84-year-old wearing jeans and a leather jacket, greeted me at the Alt-Erlaa tram stop to show me the limited-profit complex where he had lived for 40 years. Alt-Erlaa is one of the largest limited-profit complexes in Vienna, with 3,181 units in 18 futuristic towers, 23 to 27 stories tall, built between 1973 and 1986. As we approached, I saw that the towers had aged surprisingly well, maybe because greenery is timeless, and vegetation seemed to cascade off the tiered balconies. Willie had chosen a unit on the sixth floor. His rent for a nearly-1,200-square-foot apartment was 824 euros -- an amount that would be reasonable for Amarillo, Texas, or Shreveport, La., but out of the question in any of the 50 largest American metro areas.

Living in Alt-Erlaa, Willie enjoyed access to seven rooftop swimming pools, seven indoor swimming pools, tennis courts, gyms and acclaimed art. When the rest of the delegation joined us, he led us toward one of his favorite aspects of the buildings: two murals in the lobby of the second building meditating on the role of the news media and labor in society. They were by the Austrian artist Alfred Hrdlicka. ''They remind me of Orozco,'' said Dorca Reynoso, an employee at Verizon, referring to the political murals of the Mexican painter José Clemente Orozco. Reynoso's rent in Manhattan doubled in 2014 to $1,250. When her landlord proposed a 50 percent increase again in 2022, she was unable to pay and ratcheted up her organizing campaign against her landlord. ''They're so beautiful,'' she said, gazing at the paintings.

For this very reason, Vienna's limited-profit and nonprofit units were many of the delegates' favorites. Art and aesthetics matter. We visited a small nonprofit building, a co-op, that was successfully designed and developed by strangers who responded to a newspaper ad. The top floor had an expansive roof deck, a communal kitchen, a playroom and a sauna. ''You mean I could be in the sauna when my kids are in the playroom?'' said Julie Colon, a Bronx organizer who told me she gave birth alone while in the shelter system. ''This is crazy.'' Shanti Singh, a tenant-rights activist from the Bay Area with short, asymmetrically cropped hair, lingered in the sunny library with its tall windows and honey wood walls. ''I never want to leave,'' she said.

The spiral of overvaluation in housing, which makes the housing-haves rich and the have-nots desperately poor, has brought us to a point where only something radical can solve it. The problem with housing in the United States is that it has been locked in as a means of building wealth, and building wealth is irreconcilable with affordability. The housing crisis in the United States is proof. Even in 2017, before the pandemic, around 113 million Americans -- some 35 percent of the nation's population -- were living with a serious housing problem, such as physically deficient housing, burdensome costs or no housing at all, notes Alex F. Schwartz, an urban-studies professor at the New School.

Calls for a federal social-housing plan in America might sound far-fetched, but make no mistake: The United States government intervenes heavily in the housing market. It's just a two-tiered system, as Gail Radford, the historian, argues. There's generous support for affluent homeowners and deliberately insufficient support for the lowest-income households. In 2017, the United States spent $155 billion on tax breaks to homeowners and investors in rental housing and mortgage-revenue bonds, more than three times the $50 billion spent on affordable housing.

That $50 billion isn't nothing. In fact, in many U.S. cities, public spending per capita on housing and community-development subsidies is higher than in Vienna. But it seems clear that much of this money is misspent, whether through inefficient private-public partnerships like the low-income-housing tax credit; or through distortionary vouchers; or, most dubiously of all, through subsidizing homeowners, the people who need it least. ''If you give everyone demand-side subsidies, like vouchers, and there's a supply shortage, it's going to drive up prices,'' Chris Herbert, the managing director of Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies, told me. It costs the state more, and landlords often wind up pocketing the profits.

Though the Gemeindebauten represented a large initial government outlay, Vienna's social housing is now self-sustaining. Guess how much of the residents' salary goes toward the program. One percent. Social housing drives down rents in the private market by as much as 5 percent. Vouchers may appear cheaper in the short term, but directly financing well-regulated public and limited-profit construction is the only way to mitigate speculation and hedge against ever-increasing housing costs. In 2020, New York and California spent $377 and $248 per capita, respectively, in housing development, while Vienna spent just $124 -- and approximately half of Vienna's spending is on low-interest financing that will be repaid and then re-lent.

Social-housing programs have existed in America before, and they exist in America to this day. Local social-housing programs, many of them inspired by Vienna, are underway in Montgomery County, Md.; Seattle; and California. And they have a long legacy in New York, which built 66,000 affordable apartments and 69,000 limited-profit co-op apartment units from 1955 to 1981 under the Limited-Profit Housing Companies Law, also known as Mitchell-Lama, after the two legislators who introduced it. In combination with public housing, Mitchell-Lama units are a main reason economic diversity remains in the Lower East Side, Williamsburg and Chinatown.

Housing expense has been a staggering burden for so many of us, for so long, that it's hard to even contemplate what it would mean to have it recede in our minds. When I spoke to Peter Pilz, the politician who took over his grandmother's unit in Goethehof, I asked him, as I asked every Viennese tenant of social housing, what he did with all the money he saved thanks to his cheap rent. ''I haven't invested a single penny in the stock market,'' he told me. ''I would consider it an enormous waste of time to sit in front of my computer and study what the stock market is doing. I prefer to use my time writing, editing an online newspaper supporting interesting initiatives and having fun.''

Pilz was staying in Tuscany when we spoke, and he had spent the day bicycling. He stopped in Pienza to admire the small purple cathedral and sample the famous pecorino. Then he cycled on to Montalcino, where he sipped some Brunello, before returning to Bagno Vignoni to go swimming. ''That's my hard life,'' he told me. ''If people don't have to struggle all day long to survive -- if your life is made safe, at least in social conditions -- you can use your energy for much more important things.''

## Between Drought and Deluge

Brooke Jarvis | June 4, 2023 | NYTMag

*Brooke Jarvis is a contributing writer for the magazine. She last wrote about people stepping between the police and Black men.*

The shadows were long and the wind across the flatlands fierce as trucks and ATVs began pulling into Chepo Gonzales's yard one afternoon this March. ''Did you double up your socks today?'' Gonzales teased one of the arrivals, a man who complained about cold feet during the previous night's patrol. Another man leaned out the window of his truck and offered a more serious status report: ''There's a lot of water out there, but it's flowing north.''

There was so much water, in fact, that across the state it was spilling over the banks of rivers and bursting the walls of levees. For more than a week, Gonzales and his neighbors had been doing their rounds three to four times a day, looking for signs of danger along the various creeks and canals that surrounded Allensworth, a small town of houses, trailers and barns tucked amid the vast, flat farms of the San Joaquin Valley in central California. They had been ordered to evacuate -- the roads into the town were officially closed -- but here they still were. ''I'll live here till the day I die,'' Gonzales said. He loved the quiet and open spaces. If the water came high enough, he laughed, he would just move onto the roof of his house with a tent, a cooler and a grill.

Everyone knew the town was built on what had once been the shore of an enormous inland lake, called Tulare for the tules, or reeds, that grew around it. But the lake, once the largest west of the Mississippi, was long ago reduced to a memory: It was drained in the late 1800s to make way for wheat fields and orchards and dairies. Dust storms became a problem. So strong was the valley's thirst for water that even the groundwater beneath the lake's historical beds was rapidly disappearing, drawn by so many wells that the ground itself crumpled downward, in some places sinking by nearly 30 feet. In Allensworth, dwindling groundwater meant that the town well often drew water made toxic by high concentrations of agricultural runoff, and residents were advised to boil it. Creeks were marked blue on maps, but they were usually more like dusty ditches, Gonzales's 21-year-old son, Chepito, told me. Until this winter, the only way he really thought about them was as tracks for racing ATVs. But this winter had changed how people thought about a lot of things.

Since New Year's, storm after storm had pummeled the state, dropping epic quantities of water and snow. The water made its way toward the bottom of the valley, as it always had, coursing through waterways held in by earthen levees that, during drought years, grew desiccated and weak, pocked with squirrel burrows. In some parts of the valley bottom, the water wasn't really contained at all. Deanna Jackson, the executive director of the local agency that manages groundwater in the Tulare Lake Hydrologic Region, described the flooding to me as ''vagrant flows, wild flows,'' nearly unmanageable water sheeting across the landscape. Houses and farms and dairies flooded, and people were using excavators to hastily build earthen dikes around their properties. Some of these, around houses and small dairies, were a few feet tall; others, around the lands of the largest and richest agriculture companies, were towering and miles-long. Sometimes these fortifications enraged neighbors, whose land the water found instead. In a valley where powerful interests had long jockeyed for access to water, the arguments were now about who would bear the flood.

A few days before, a canal wall along a train track just north of Allensworth, visible from Gonzales's yard, began to crumble. A froth of brown storm water started to spread toward the houses. Neighbors grabbed shovels and came running; Gonzales and his son brought over the tractors that Gonzales usually uses to muck out paddocks. When they ran out of sandbags, their neighbor Ruben Guerrero, who rushed from work at a nearby elementary school to join the emergency response, had an idea: to fortify the canal wall with the help of a roll of sheet plastic he was planning to use for a house-painting project. The men finally forced the water back with a fix that was part berm, part sand burrito. As the flood pulse receded, they celebrated their victory. But it turned out to be another case of competing interests: The railroad company that owned the land dismantled their work, saying that by protecting their houses, they had threatened the company's property. So hour by hour, they patrolled the levee, watching the water flow through, quick and deep.

Shortly after, another alert went through town: A different levee, this one along Deer Creek, had given way. Floodwater was again flowing toward Allensworth. First, though, the water surged into a pistachio orchard, where it threatened to uproot trees and drown them in sediment. A video that later went viral captured the farmer's response: He drove two pickup trucks to the top of the levee, filled their beds with soil to weigh them down and then revved the engines and propelled the trucks straight into the flooded breach where the levee wall used to be. (One, fittingly, was a Chevy.) Heavy equipment and helicopter loads of sandbags from Cal Fire completed the job, but rumors swirled about why the breach had occurred. Jack Mitchell, the head of the local flood-control district, reported that it looked as if a cut had been made with machinery. Had someone intentionally cut the levee, jeopardizing Allensworth, not to mention someone else's farm, to save his own? ''I can't see how a tree, or a product, a vegetable, is more important than a life,'' Guerrero said, shaking his head. ''Tomatoes are not the only ones that matter. Our lives matter, too.''

Around town, houses were marked with what looked at first like little streamers but were really bits of caution tape, placed by a swift-water rescue team, as a preparatory measure, to mark which houses were still occupied: red if a house was empty, yellow if it wasn't. ''It's rare to see red ones,'' said Kiara Rendon, an Allensworth resident. Her car was packed with supplies, for herself and the younger siblings she cares for, but she had yet to leave: ''A lot of people didn't evacuate because this is all they have.'' A community leader in Allensworth named Denise Kadara told me the same thing. Allensworth was the first town in California to be established by African Americans. It is named for Col. Allen Allensworth, who escaped slavery by fleeing behind Union lines and then joined the Navy before making his way to California. It later became a home for farmworkers and people who couldn't afford to live elsewhere. Kadara felt certain that if residents had followed the order to evacuate, Allensworth would have been sacrificed to save other places deemed more valuable.

A few days earlier, Rendon came home to find her sister, five months pregnant and alone with a 3-year-old, shoveling mud as water rose in the field behind their house. Rendon took me to see the spot where a crew from Cal Fire helped the family make a small drainage ditch and where water was finally running away from their home. Her gaze kept drifting east, where the other legacy of the storms, a record-setting snowpack, 50 feet in places, glistened white on the distant mountains. All of that water, she knew, would have to find its way to low ground. She didn't know what would happen then.

''A lot of people would say, You live out in the desert,'' she said thoughtfully, as water rushed past her feet. ''But look at it now.''

In recent years, it is the dry side of California that has captured headlines: dwindling reservoirs where boat ramps lead only to sand, almond orchards ripped up for lack of irrigation water, catastrophic wildfires that rage through desiccated forests and into towns. In the longer view, though, the state's water problems have come just as often from deluge as from drought. Other parts of the country can count on reasonably steady precipitation, but California has always been different, teetering between drenching winters and blazing summers, between wet years and dry ones -- fighting endlessly to exert control over a flow of water that vacillates, sometimes wildly, between too much and too little.

As we've learned more about how humans are transforming the planet's systems, these swings have grown only more pronounced, leaving experts to wonder how the state will face a future balanced ever more precariously between wet and dry. Can it find ways to better handle -- to steward, even -- the overwhelming water when it does come? And will those measures be sufficient for it to withstand the times it doesn't? These questions matter not just to California and those who live there, but to anyone who eats the food the state produces, who is affected by the fluctuations in its economy or who lives in a place trying to manage its own climate-fueled ''extremification'' -- in other words, all of us.

California's very first biological survey began amid extremes. A botanist on that expedition described contending with clouds of dust and struggling to find enough water to keep the mules going. Then, on Christmas Eve in 1861, the rain began to fall, and it didn't stop for 43 days. In the floods and mudslides that followed, uncountable homes were swept away, and thousands of people (as well as hundreds of thousands of cows) died. ''Nearly every house and farm over this immense region is gone,'' the botanist wrote to his brother. Floodwater covered the Central Valley for 300 miles. In Sacramento, under 10 feet of muddy water, the new governor took a rowboat to his inauguration. But soon the young Legislature simply gave up and moved to the coast for six months while the capital dried out. It took another year before the bankrupted state was able to pay its employees again.

This founding story of statehood proved prophetic. The state's shifts into abundance or drought were often so complete that it became easy to believe, at least for a while, that you could live -- and build -- in one reality as if the other didn't exist. ''Even with geology functioning at such remarkably short intervals, people have ample time to forget it,'' John McPhee wrote in 1988, about why rich people in Los Angeles kept building homes on mountainsides that frequently collapsed in heavy rain. John Steinbeck described a similar amnesia among farmers in the Salinas Valley, where sometimes ''the land would shout with grass'' and other times it would crack and scab and the cows would starve. ''It never failed,'' he wrote, ''that during the dry years the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years. It was always that way.''

But farming and cities depend on predictability, and as its population and industries grew, California sought to take control of its water destiny. The state built a vast plumbing system, in the form of dams and reservoirs and canals and aqueducts and levees and pumping stations, that could collect water and move it around, keeping it out of the places where it wasn't wanted and moving it to the places where it was. ''Everything depends on the manipulation of water,'' Marc Reisner wrote in the 1986 book ''Cadillac Desert.'' ''On capturing it behind dams, storing it and rerouting it in concrete rivers over distances of hundreds of miles.''

The system strained to adapt to what nature offered and was far from equitable, with the state's poor suffering the most during both flood and drought alike. In wet years, there were floods big enough to overwhelm levees and mad scrambles to get rid of water that quickly went from precious to perilous. The trucks in the Deer Creek levee were not an anomaly but part of a tradition: A few hundred yards from where Gonzales and his neighbors repaired the canal wall north of Allensworth, Gonzales pointed to the spot where he believes his father's '39 Plymouth still resides after being pushed into a different breach during a flood when he was a child. The elder Gonzales might have gotten the idea from J.G. Boswell, a land baron and farmer whom the journalist Mark Arax called ''the king of California'' and whose company was among those now throwing up impressive new earthenworks around the orchards it cultivated in and around the old lake bed. In 1969, when a key levee threatened to burst and flood his land, Boswell sent workers with pocketfuls of cash to every wrecking yard in the San Joaquin Valley. ''Using cranes, they laced eight miles of the big, curved levee with Chevys, Cadillacs, El Dorados, Pontiacs and Thunderbirds,'' Arax wrote. ''A bumper-to-bumper bulwark'' against the ghost of a lake.

In dry years, there were fights over how much water to leave flowing through rivers and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, where fish and other species desperately needed it, but which looked to some farmers like waste. Year after year California borrowed heavily from its future, pulling from its groundwater as if overdrawing from a bank account, which caused new problems. The water left behind was increasingly unsafe to drink, and when the land above the extracted groundwater sank, the elaborate infrastructure atop it sagged and struggled to deliver water. When groundwater was depleted near the coast, it allowed seawater to intrude, turning coveted freshwater brackish.

Still, the system worked well enough for the state's population and farms to explode in size, and for some to make a rich living while riding the whiplash between wet and dry.

By the 1990s, scientists modeling the future impacts of the world's changing climate were predicting that one of the major problems for California would be the intensification of its already considerable precipitation extremes: a future of ever wilder swings between deeper droughts and more dangerous storms. It didn't take long for it to become clear that the shift was already underway. Although California's average precipitation stayed fairly steady, the averages masked important changes in the way water arrived. Less of it fell as snow, which was a problem because slowly melting snowpack acted as a natural reservoir -- a much more capacious one than anything the state could possibly build to replace it -- safely storing winter wetness and then meting it out in the dry summer. It came less often, which stretched out the time that plants and animals and soils and farmers had to suffer through drought. And when water did come, it was more likely to do so suddenly (so that parched and fire-scarred landscapes were less prepared to absorb it), with greater intensity (so that it caused flash floods and burst levees) and with overwhelming quantity (so that water managers ran out of safe places to put it).

By the 2010s, a decade in which so many forecast climate disasters began to arrive that the climate scientist Kate Marvel called it ''the decade we knew we were right,'' California was already beginning to seem like a different state -- or, put another way, more itself than ever before. The driest four-year stretch since the state began keeping records killed more than 100 million trees, fueled horrific wildfires and left taps dry -- and then gave way, in 2017, to California's second-wettest year ever. Flooding caused more than $1 billion in damage just to roads and highways; in Big Sur, landslides buried Highway 1 under more than 65 feet of rock and dirt. On the northwestern edge of the Central Valley, 180,000 people had to evacuate downstream from Oroville, California's second-largest dam, as it threatened to give way. And then came yet another whipsaw, back to drought.

The speed and severity of the transitions were sometimes dizzying. Paradise, the town where 85 people were killed by a drought-fueled wildfire, is less than 20 miles from the dam that nearly failed during the deluge the year before. And just weeks after the fire, some evacuees had to relocate again: Intense rain was battering the fire scars, and the camp they'd moved to was now in the path of flash floods.

The storms that pummeled the state in 2017 arrived, like much of California's rain, in the form of atmospheric rivers, great currents of water vapor that form over the tropics and flow through the sky, often turning to rain and wind when they collide with land. (This is true of the West Coast in general, and Oregon, Washington and British Columbia are all facing their own versions of future water whiplash.) The average such river, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, carries the same amount of water as the Mississippi does at its mouth, but a large one can carry 15 times as much. Sometimes the rivers arrive one after another, crashing like so many waves against a shore. The 1862 flood was this sort of event. The storms that caused it have since been estimated to be 100- to 200-year events, meaning that under historical conditions they would have a 0.5 to 1 percent chance of occurring in a given year -- rare enough that we could, like Steinbeck's farmers, allow ourselves to forget about the risk, but not nearly so rare that we should.

Of course, our present reality is such that historical conditions, and the risks and constraints associated with them, are becoming less and less relevant. In 2011, a team of more than 100 scientists, engineers and other experts convened by the U.S. Geological Survey modeled what a similar storm -- they called it the ARkStorm, for Atmospheric River 1,000 -- would do to the California of today, with its much larger population and expansive, vulnerable infrastructure. The answer included hundreds of landslides, millions of people evacuated and financial damages more than three times as high as what even a severe earthquake might bring. But that assessment looked only at the potential impacts of a storm of historic proportions. Climate change is not only making events like the 1862 catastrophe more likely to occur (by 300 to 400 percent, according to one estimate); it is also creating the conditions for storms that will make the 1862 flood look small. The two atmospheric rivers that led to a near catastrophe at Oroville, one study found, carried 11 to 15 percent more rain than would have been possible if humans had not altered the atmosphere. And the largest rivers of the future will be even bigger, last longer and carry water at a much higher density. They will also arrive more often.

When the climate scientists Xingying Huang and Daniel Swain modeled ARkStorms based on California's predicted conditions, they found that future storms would be able to douse California with a load of water 45 percent greater than anything that has been possible under historical conditions. Because the precipitation is likely to fall quickly and be tilted toward rain instead of snow, peak runoff would mean between two and four times as much water racing across the landscape as during the largest floods of the past.

That updated analysis was published in August 2022, when California was once again parched: More than 99 percent of the state was officially in drought, and large swaths were considered extreme or exceptional. ''The apparent irony of publishing research on the growing risk of a California megaflood in the midst of a severe drought is not lost on the authors,'' Swain wrote on his blog. At the time, forecasts called for the dry trend to continue, but Swain cautioned that California should not make the old mistake of forgetting the wet times during the dry ones. The research suggested, he wrote, that ''it's only a matter of time before this latent increase in severe flood risk becomes 'unmasked' in the Golden State.''

The months that followed were no ARkStorm but quickly offered a startling reminder of how unprepared the state is even for smaller events. By the end of March, 31 atmospheric-river storms, including six classified as strong and one as extreme, hit the West Coast. Near Sacramento, the Cosumnes River broke out of its levees. Three people died, and an evacuation order had to be rescinded when floods made the roads too dangerous for escape. A creek outside Planada filled the town with waist-high water, destroying houses and cars. In the Bay Area, high winds shattered the glass of skyscrapers, blew a couch from a high-rise apartment onto the sidewalk below and killed five people in a single day. Tornadoes touched down outside Los Angeles, and snow fell as low as the Hollywood sign. In the San Bernardino Mountains, the snow drifts piled so high that roofs collapsed, natural-gas lines fractured and caused fires and the Sheriff's Department had to airlift rations to people who were stranded. Water managers worried that the disaster some had started to call the Big Melt was just beginning.

Driving over the coastal mountains during one of this spring's weaker atmospheric rivers, I had to pull over to wait out blinding rain and a fusillade of flying tree branches. I was on my way to visit Pajaro, a town south of Santa Cruz. Nearly two weeks earlier, the Pajaro River broke through a levee at midnight, prompting a hurried evacuation of 8,500 people, many of them workers in the valley's berry and salad industries. Families were still sleeping in cars or in hotels or in the makeshift shelter at the county fairgrounds, their debts mounting while their homes sat empty and the fields were too flooded to be worked. Every day people gathered on the edge of the closed bridge leading to town, where the river still ran high and brown and tents dotted the riverside, to ask when they would be allowed to resume their lives. On the day they were permitted to re-enter town, nearly two weeks after the flood, I watched shopkeepers mucking out buildings and residents wheeling home bottles of donated water. The public water system was still inoperable.

Andrew Fisher, a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who has studied the Pajaro River watershed since the 1990s, told me that he regards it as a microcosm of the problems and possibilities of California's water future. For decades, it has been known that the levees on the river were dangerously out of date, designed for the more moderate California of the past. By the time of this year's floods, the levees were prepared for only an eight-year flood, or one with about a 12 percent chance of happening in any given year -- hardly the contingency that infrastructure should be built to address. ''That's kind of putting up a flimsy garden fence around your property to keep out wildebeests,'' one hydrologist told me. Although federal funds were available, the towns in the valley weren't rich and never had the money to pay their share for a replacement. Decisions about levee updates -- which are sorely needed in much of the state but are currently governed by a hodgepodge of regulations and funding schemes -- are prioritized in part according to the value of the property to be protected. This too often leaves low-income areas high and dry, or, more accurately, low and wet. ''It's not the same as redlining,'' Fisher said, pausing as if to consider whether he agreed with his own statement. ''But it is a systematic problem if you have a decision process that essentially writes off poor people.'' To protect the most vulnerable communities, water experts have begun pushing the state to set much higher minimum standards for all levees. But that would take billions of dollars, and the political will to spend them.

The Pajaro Valley isn't attached to the large canal system on the other side of the coastal mountains. (The idea of building a connection was floated, but local critics saw the cost as a public subsidy for corporate farms and defeated it.) This means that there's already no infusion of water from outside the natural watershed, unlike in Southern California, which for decades has pulled large quantities of water from the hugely overdrawn Colorado River and is beginning to face a future of difficult cuts. There's also no access to snowpack from the Sierra -- a reality that will eventually and painfully come for the rest of the state as Sierra snowpack declines precipitously over the coming decades. ''That's more water than is stored behind all the dams in the state!'' Fisher said.

Because the Pajaro Valley already has to make do with its own limited water budget, farmers and water managers have learned to make some of the hard choices that are still pending in other regions. Statewide groundwater conservation has been required by law since only 2014. The valley still overdraws its groundwater, but by less than it used to, thanks to the recycling of wastewater, conservation measures and proactive efforts to recharge its aquifers. Withdrawals of groundwater in the valley are tracked, which isn't the case in most other places, and they are very expensive. Fisher believes that a lot more can be done to expand on these ideas and implement them elsewhere, but that any lasting solution will require a deeper understanding of what he calls hydrological services: the way that different parts of a healthy watershed can support the resilience of the whole if allowed to do so.

Before California was developed, rivers that coursed down from the mountains slowed as they reached the valley floor, then meandered across a landscape rich with oxbows and seasonal wetlands. Here, habitat for fish and other animals developed, and areas of slow water offered places for microbes, mussels and arthropods to clean pollutants out of water and for water to trickle down into aquifers, recharging them. A lot more of the land was porous, full of native plants and spongy soil instead of pavement and sunbaked agricultural fields, which meant that more water could be absorbed. (When researchers built a model of the predevelopment Pajaro Valley and then virtually rained on it, they found that significantly less water ran off as floodwater because so much was sucked into the landscape.) Groundwater was generally high enough that water was able to flow back and forth between rivers and aquifers, which helped regulate river temperatures and kept aquifers from filling with salts and pollutants. Today this connection has largely been severed.

In a future in which snowpack dwindles and good dam sites are already in use, the best place for water storage will be underground. The potential is enormous. While California's reservoirs can hold about 40 million acre-feet of water, the state has emptied three times that amount from its groundwater basins. But first the water needs an opportunity to penetrate those basins. Not all soils are good for groundwater recharge; you need areas with deposits of gravel, sandy soil instead of clay. Because rivers drop different sizes of sediments depending on how fast they are moving, finding these areas requires uncovering the historical hydrology below California's surface. Fisher showed me maps produced by electromagnetic survey that reveal the composition of soils. The places he wanted to target for recharge stood out in dark relief, snaking like the curves of long-forgotten rivers, which is exactly what they were.

''I see it as replumbing California for the future climate,'' said Julie Rentner, director of the conservation nonprofit River Partners. It was a bright, chilly day near Modesto, and Rentner was showing me some farms that were once typical of the Central Valley: laser-leveled fields sown in alfalfa and wheat. On that day, though, the land looked more like the valley of a couple of centuries ago. The San Joaquin and Tuolumne Rivers had broken their banks and flooded the fields -- which were no longer fields so much as copses of carefully planted trees and other native plants sitting four feet deep in water. Everywhere there were birds; a river otter darted across the top of a levee. Six months earlier in this spot, Rentner told me, you could ''ankle wade'' across the San Joaquin, a river once fed by the waters of Tulare Lake, back when the lake was sometimes high enough to overflow its banks. Now a little rill of wavelets across the surface of the flood was the only thing that marked the river's usual borders.

This land had flooded before, most notably in 1997, when levees broke in 17 places. River Partners later worked to buy the farmland from its frustrated owners, hoping to turn it into habitat for threatened native species. But soon, Rentner said, the group started hearing from flood-management people and groundwater-recharge people who were excited about how many different benefits a reimagined version of the property could provide for the state and for local residents, who had little access to natural spaces. The restoration project at the confluence of the two rivers, known as Dos Rios, appeared on the cover of the most recent Central Valley Flood Protection Plan, a template of what was possible. It is slated to become California's newest state park.

In Grayson, a town near Modesto that came close to flooding in January, a group of residents explored a different floodplain, where high waters now lapped against yards at the town's edge, that River Partners is helping to restore. John Mataka, who has lived in Grayson for almost 50 years, told me that he considers the restoration ''a form of reparations for the community.'' The San Joaquin, on which Grayson was once a stop for steamboats, supported a rich salmon fishery before dams and agriculture transformed the river. Today Grayson depends on groundwater, but the water supply has so much agricultural runoff that it requires advance treatment to meet safety standards for drinking. Mataka hoped that the restored floodplain would provide more and cleaner water. He was convinced that it had already protected his house from recent floodwaters that had entered the town. ''We would have been like Planada,'' he said.

After decades of delays, a plan to improve flood control on the Pajaro River finally received enough funding to move forward last September, months before the levee was breached in the middle of the night. The repairs will come too late for the displaced people of Pajaro, but Fisher and other experts and planners still see them as an opportunity -- a chance to rethink how water will flow in the valley and in the California of the future. Instead of containing the river within narrow walls, the new plan makes room for the water to begin to meander and spread as it once did. The group is pushing to design areas that can be allowed to flood when waters run high that can serve as wildlife habitats and places for water to re-enter the earth.

Fisher is also partnering with local landowners to set up experimental catchment and infiltration basins -- including some lined with wood chips or almond shells, whose carbon helps microbes remove pollutants -- for recharging groundwater. One farmer called Fisher after seeing him give a talk, determined to make sure the valley still had groundwater when it was his grandchildren's turn to farm. This, Fisher noted, was an all-too-rare motivator in a state where much of the land is owned by pension funds and other distant investors.

In the Central Valley, Helen Dahlke, a hydrologist at U.C.-Davis, is working with farmers to experiment with diverting floodwaters to their vineyards, fields and orchards: Where does it infiltrate best? What crops are most capable of handling it? She told me that when she first came to California 10 years ago, the primary goal for floodwaters was to get rid of them: to confine them to narrow channels, to move them off the landscape as quickly as possible. When she tried to push farmers to hold floodwater on their cropland so it could recharge the groundwater below, most thought she was nuts. Why deal with sediment or crop damage when there was an irrigation system that still pulled from reservoirs or aquifers? But the intervening decade of floods and droughts had made it difficult to ignore the role of floodwaters -- as potential resource and threat alike -- and farmers are growing more interested. This year, in particular, she said, ''I think a lot of people are finding that this land used to serve as spreading ground for flood retention every spring.''

Similar projects, using flooding and wastewater to replenish groundwater basins, are spreading -- but still tiny compared with the state's future needs. To really scale up, the state will have to tackle various regulatory and infrastructural hurdles, including dealing with California's complicated system of water rights and finding ways to move water where it needs to go despite inadequate canals. Planners and politicians will also need to get serious about the aspects of climate risk that are still under our control, such as whether we continue to build in the most dangerous places or grow the most water-intensive crops. Water experts also recommend taking large swaths of farmland out of production, because saving aquifers will require both reduced pumping and space for increased recharge. Floods and droughts, historically managed separately, will need to be tackled holistically, balancing, for example, the need to keep empty space in reservoirs for flood control and the need to use that space to capture as much moisture as possible to recharge groundwater basins.

It took nine different funding programs and more than a decade of work just to buy the Dos Rios land, Rentner told me. Negotiations to breach the levee that ran across it, keeping floodwaters off half the reserve, were still going on; decommissioning a federal levee can require an act of Congress. And the Dos Rios land is only a couple of thousand acres. Estimates suggest that California needs to retire hundreds of thousands of acres of agricultural land, at a minimum, to make way for a more resilient water system. In the fall of 2022, the state allocated $40 million for the restoration of natural floodplains, but then abruptly cut that funding when the economy sputtered and projections for state revenues ran low. The cuts were announced the same day that Planada was evacuated.

Still, the sun was sparkling off the water, and the levee was dotted with deer prints. The leaves of the submerged trees were turning the fresh green of spring. Rentner confessed herself to be ''hopelessly hopeful'' that, despite everything, a different sort of state was still possible.

To the south, in the basin that once held Tulare Lake, the floodwater was still coursing through rivers and canals toward the old lake bed. There had been so much land subsidence since the last flood that no one knew quite what the contours of this one would be: The low places and danger zones would be discovered as the waters arrived to fill them.

One morning, not far from Allensworth, I met up with Frank Fernandes, a third-generation dairy farmer in the valley, and Kathy Wood McLaughlin, a biologist and water consultant who sits on the board of the Tule Basin Land and Water Conservation Trust with him. Fernandes had spent the last week in a frenzy, checking on the cattle he raises with his brothers and clocking long nights helping his neighbors evacuate their herds to higher ground. (The trickiest part was not the evacuation itself, he explained, but finding places where the cows could continue to be fed and milked on their inflexible schedule.) Now he finally had a moment to take in the transformation of a world he'd known all his life.

It was a startling and confounding new geography. Helicopters buzzed in the skies above us, ferrying ever more sandbags into ever more breaches. Farmers in pickup trucks kept flagging Fernandes down -- he seemed to know everyone -- eager to trade news about whose land was flooding and where the latest breaches were and to offer tips about navigating this new world. ''Down this road,'' one advised, ''you just have to watch out for the sinkhole and then climb the hill from 'Dukes of Hazzard.''' We drove over a steep new embankment and past ruined cars abandoned in high water. At one point, we had to stop at a destroyed bridge, where a pair of beekeepers from Utah were stranded, puzzling over how to recover their hives, which they'd rented out to pollinate almond trees on the other side. Fernandes, who proved game to push his truck through impressive mud pits, offered to guide them the long way around.

It was still March, and the air was chilly, a small blessing. With so many canals already failing, no one wanted the record snowpack to melt into the valley any quicker than it had to. But water managers knew that they could only do their best to manage the water's arrival; nothing would stop it from coming. By mid-May, there would be hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of standing water, and the state would be scrambling to save the city Corcoran, as well as the large prison there, from the part of the flood that had yet to arrive. After weeks of flooding, the governor did an about-face on the flood budget, putting back the $40 million for floodplain restoration and adding $250 million for emergency response, including flood control on the Pajaro River, and raising the levees around Corcoran by four feet. But the region's thick clay soils, remnants of a lake far more ancient than Tulare, meant that the water would most likely take years to fully drain away.

Fernandes drove through fields of winter wheat that were revisiting their past as wetlands, thick with birds that Wood McLaughlin delightedly identified as coots and avocets and black-necked stilts, and onto a piece of land that the land trust bought to turn into restored floodplain and habitat. Flocks of white-faced ibises flew overhead, their long beaks and legs stretched elegantly against the sky.

A few wrong turns and levees later, we arrived at a place, just south of Corcoran, where we could finally go no farther. The water had risen over the road, over the land, up the sides of houses and abandoned vehicles, as far as we -- and the others who'd gathered to gawk at this astonishing sight -- could see. The old hydrology was reasserting itself, the lake bottom transmuted back into a lake.

At the site of yet another levee breach, Fernandes stopped to chat with a pipeline technician he knew, until he looked back and realized that the road we'd driven in on had disappeared under the rising water. ''We've got to go!'' he yelled, and we all scrambled back into the truck. We'd have to find a different way out.

### On Don DeLillo

(supp. Passed over for Nobel) Frank Guan Speaking in Tongues

Pub in n+1 mag Issue: Agitation Fall 2023

Tags Reading, Writing, and PublishingReviews

Don DeLillo: Three Novels of the 1980s. Ed. Mark Osteen. Library of America, 2022.

Don DeLillo: Mao II, Underworld. Ed. Mark Osteen. Library of America, 2023.

NOTHING BECOMES, OR DISTORTS, the Eighties so much as their end. The fall of the Soviet system would famously herald a new mode of globalized living, familiar by now, which went on to disable historical vision itself. Retrospective knowledge of the Eighties’ finish drains the period’s occurrences of much suspense: close perception is deferred by apprehension of an overwhelming fate, even as the will to recollect—for those not on the right—is sickened by it. Hindsight and immediacy can sometimes be the enemies of insight; the end of history has spoiled us in more ways than one. That decade’s essence is as mute to us by now as we are deaf to it.

Of course, the Eighties have some bearing on the present world. The demise of organized labor, the decline of real wages, and the diminution of consumer industries faced with third world outsourcing; the primacy of finance and the shift toward mass incarceration justified by draconian drug laws; the negative trade balances, federal deficits, and tax cuts evened out by massive foreign purchases of Treasury bonds—these interlinked phenomena form the basis of contemporary governance, and even casual political historians today know how they were first ramped up during the Eighties, and by whom. But our good materialist perspective of the Eighties may be too exact, too sure. The uniform, relentless quality of neoliberal policies as applied once the Nineties began is projected back onto their pivotal decade; the shaky and experimental elements of the eventual consensus in its fledgling years have been effaced by the foreknowledge of its universal triumph.

Much like developments in the contemporary USSR, China, and Iran, the neoliberal turn in the US was a seismic-grade reform of the economy whose final level of success was anything but foreordained. Concluding as a certainty, it was conceived in trial and error. If it paid off greatly, it started as a wager just as great, and was perceived as such. What we largely miss about the live experience of the Eighties is its sense of global and systemic risk—precisely the same modes of risk that the decade’s own outcome would end up eclipsing. Today’s would-be historian of the Eighties can be likened to a painter tasked to paint the sun that blinded them; the memory of the Eighties, to a sports car—cherry red, of course—whose keys are locked inside. Just as the barrier between the West and East went down, another one thrust up between the old and new. Though not concrete, it’s no less difficult to scale. What, on the other side, deserves the effort?

The answer can only be beauty. Presided over and—somehow or other—stimulated by the neoconservative tandem of Reagan and Bush, nonconservative America artistically retorted with the force and brilliance of a supernova. Pop songs, fine arts, bright screens, belles lettres: on every frequency the Eighties overflowed with star power. No single sector of the population was responsible. Virtually every demographic poured energies into a conflagration of such magnitude that the listing of its products indexed to a single letter—Basquiat and Blue Velvet; Beloved and Blade Runner; Raging Bull and Reign in Blood; Bad Behavior and Tar Baby; Blood Meridian and Hill Street Blues; Eric B. & Rakim—arguably matches any prior national decade’s total output. An authentic renaissance, a golden age to end all golden ages, sealed up by an oblivion just as absolute: what better way to sum up the US Eighties in all their paradoxical recursion, in their fusion of stark resplendence and deep mystery.

What’s offered by the recent Library of America compilation Don DeLillo: Three Novels of the 1980s, then, is a rare potential avenue into the heart of multiple enigmas. How did the Eighties feel and taste, and how did one novelist, whose gifts during the Seventies were as obvious as his limits, tap into those strange sensibilities to author works now firmly in the canon? How could the decade’s various American artists produce, as if in unison, so much collective radiance? And given that our sensibilities and theirs have had to grow so radically distinct from one another, how relevant can all these peaks in culture be for artists operating now?

LACUNAE ABOUND: many of the most pivotal Eighties events would occur well outside American borders, well beyond the classic 20th-century American context for overseas mass memory—that is, conscription into war. Nothing anchors cultural memory of the Eighties in the way that the world wars, Korea, or Vietnam did before. Though the decade did end, momentously and famously, with the devastation of America’s superpower nemesis, this triumph was owed not to American citizens in combat, but to an unlikely tag team of liberal demonstrators in the Soviet bloc and Islamic zealots in the greater Middle East. While the liberals were reliable worshipers of Western values, the jihadis were harder to surely predict: despising the impiety of both cold war camps, their violence was equally likely to endanger the interests of one as of the other.

Though the mujahideen in Afghanistan gained more attention in more recent years, no man summed up the volatility of Eighties jihad as much as the Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian theocrat whose revolutionary state sponsored the American embassy hostage crisis and the bombing of hundreds of American marines in Beirut while also massacring Iranian communists and indirectly funding cocaine-toting contra death squads near pro-Soviet Nicaragua. Inflaming a nation and army with militant faith, the cleric was no client but a genuine sovereign; his strategic decisions would largely determine the global economy’s vital supply of fresh Persian Gulf oil, and with it in large part the current account of the Soviet Union, a huge oil exporter. Few men were more central to the decade or more incomprehensible to the American imagination. Yet monitoring the moods and choices of the holy man, and those of people like him, was imperative for any group with deep investments in the region, American or otherwise.

A few months after Don DeLillo and his wife Barbara Bennett, backed by a Guggenheim grant, reached Greece in October 1978, Khomeini, backed by the street protests of millions of believers, forced the monarch of Iran to quit his throne. As stated in DeLillo’s new preface to The Names, the 1982 novel written during and about his years in Athens, the capital soon became a refuge for Iranians fleeing revolutionary chaos. Narrated by James Axton, an innocent abroad tasked by an American conglomerate with assessing the security of Middle Eastern governments in the revolution’s wake, the novel inducts its reader into a world still saturated with risks global and systemic—the coups d’état, the flows of oil and cash, the alternating menaces of left and right. Much like its period companions Ishtar, The Counterlife, and Mating, The Names is spurred by foreign turmoil to conduct prolonged reflections on romantic commitment and expatriate selfhood, its plot a weave of ties to lovers, links to homelands. There’s an unfaithful husband in transit between different ports, allured by alien communes while divided from his wife and son—a sort of late modern Odyssey, then, with jets and geopolitics replacing rafts and gods.

The distance between James and Kathryn, his estranged Canadian wife, is not unbridgeable. Yet Kathryn’s conviction that “there ought to be something higher than the corporation” pushes her to cast a cold eye on James’s new line of work, while his reply—“There’s the orgasm”—signals the loose, cool mentality that may part them for good. Having met and married while participating in the antiwar movement, James and Kathryn seem to represent two separate paths out of Sixties-style rebellion. She retains the ethics and matures into historical research; he keeps the thrill seeking and plunges eagerly into “the world of corporate transients,” its affairs. “Everything here is serious,” he exults to a friend. But he himself is not.

How James ceases being unserious—how he becomes the author of this well-wrought, morally grounded text detailing his unseriousness—is the mystery of The Names’s plot. Owen Brademas, the aging American supervisor of Kathryn’s archaeological dig in the Cyclades, discovers traces of a cult perhaps responsible for a recent area murder. Obsessed for reasons yet unclear, Owen transmits his discovery and obsession to James as well as Frank Volterra, an Axton family friend and independent film director hungry for radical subject matter. (Frank’s awareness that he might become one of “the once promising beginners who overextended, who burned out, who miscalculated, who didn’t deliver, who ran out of luck” could double as DeLillo’s take on his own situation as a noteworthy but not yet major artist.) Ranging over Greece, the Middle East, and India, they discover that the cult, dwindling and itinerant, worships language—their leading question for potential acolytes is “How many languages do you speak?” They select their sacrifices based on names: once they find a person whose initials match those of a nearby village, they kill them there.

The flaws of The Names are not many, but they are central. Since the emotional life of James and Kathryn’s genius son Tap remains opaque to the reader—his progenitors’ strife, itself depicted sharply, seems to have left no discernible scar on his psyche—he floats through the book at a saintly remove that is truly incredible. His father evinces some symptoms of psychic unrealness as well. By his own account, James is a baby boomer in his mid-thirties with no known experience of creative nonfiction outside of institutional copywriting, a man-child morally flexible enough to cheat on his family, ghostwrite for an Air Force general, and cheerfully rationalize his work in risk insurance as “the world’s biggest, richest companies protecting their investments.” Would such a person’s self-discovery—spoilers—as a dupe of the intelligence community actually suffice to help him change his ways, let alone start to transform his prose into the stern cascade of apt, momentous sentences that constitute the text at hand? Finally there’s the cult, Ta Onómata (in Greek, The Names), which gestures toward premodern legacies that were excluded from DeLillo’s prior novels even as its logically driven but ultimately senseless killing is presented as a distillation of the carnage of modernity wherein “the means to contend with death has become death.” Yet the cult lacks both the ancient imperative of divinity and the imperative of modernity’s substitute for divinity: politics. What could be more unreal than a 20th-century cult whose killings aren’t political? If it functions reasonably as a private cipher for the author’s death drive, the purity of its abstraction prevents it from taking on public significance. Properly speaking, the language cult as central metaphor is flat, inert. The fascination it exerts over the protagonist is as unearned as his subsequent repulsion from it is unfelt.

Unstable at the base, The Names is nonetheless precisely what DeLillo’s introduction claims it is: “a major departure.” An array of brilliant tangents steadies its unwieldy core conception. Secondary characters are crisply outlined, differentiated to a new degree. The native language of DeLillo’s Seventies novels—a metallic, private, quasi-mystical patois laced with penetrating quips—is pared back to make room for something like a genuine conversation, an engagement with diverging voices. The space overseas is here crucial. Bruised by adulteries on both sides, grappling with imperial decline, the obligatory pair of Brits respond in tones of gentle embitterment, maintaining their formation in retreat. A Greek, the British wife’s seducer, works for American firms but may also have ties to the radical left: his measured rants against the influence of NATO and the CIA in Greece are informed by the mentality of nations doomed to “being small and exposed, being strategic.” James’s American colleagues, his colony of business operatives and second wives, can be disarmingly personable, candidly seductive within reason. (No other novel captures so well the spontaneous camaraderie of professional Americans in foreign settings, the simultaneous easing of the ego-corset under common pressures.) In Athens an atmosphere surges, in equal parts luminous, mellow, and paranoid: very convincing.

The excision of bleak humor from DeLillo’s new style in The Names—nothing absurdly funny here—permits him to devote more energies to renovating physical reality.

The sun is obscured in dense ascending cloud. Soon the island is a silhouette, a conjecture or mood of light, scant and pale on the iron sea.

If Greek or Latin characters are paving stones, Arabic is rain. I saw writing everywhere, the cursive beaded slant in tile, tapestry, brass and wood, in faience mosaics and on the white veils of women crowded in a horse-drawn cart. I looked up to see words turning corners, arranged geometrically on mud-brick walls, knotted and mazed, stuccoed, painted, inlaid, climbing gateways and minarets.

We went to dinner in an old mansion near the U.S. embassy. Hardeman was inhaling short Scotches. The perfect part in his hair, the geometric glasses and three-piece suit seemed the achievements of a systematic self-knowledge. This was the finished thing. He was physically compact, worked neatly into well-cut clothes, and nothing attached to him that had not been the subject of meticulous inner testing.

Meeting light figures, foreign dimensions, and viceroys at striking, precisely honed angles—this is an outgoing style, a speech that does not know in advance what it will find. Its continual presence in the novel represents a fundamental shift in DeLillo’s narratives from zugzwang—the dilemma, however grim, of renouncing or participating in the social—to what might be called agoraphilia. Greece, after all, was where art first started differentiating itself from religion. It’s somehow fitting—harmonious, even—that the outstanding physicality and civic bonds that set the ancient Greek writers apart should play a role in reacquainting the estranged American author with his secular nature, his empire.

WHAT IS WHITE NOISE? This simple question, since the novel’s 1985 release, is the great unsolved problem of our fiction criticism. The experience of this book continues to evade even the most basic of analyses. Still, its force is dealt with not by facing up to it, but by ignoring it. Like Jehovah in the Sinai with the Hebrews, it has lit the way for forty years of readers while remaining firmly out of reach. No wonder the existing language equal to its impact has not been found in book reviews, but in eyewitness testimony to another, more contemporary desert cloud.

The lighting effects beggared description. The whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violet, gray, and blue. It lighted every peak, crevasse and ridge of the nearby mountain range with a clarity and beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined.

What the Trinity nuclear test once achieved for American political thought, White Noise does on the plane of American post-Sixties fiction: it practically splits time apart, conjoining inferno and paradise with such intense craft that the world starts anew. The three major currents of cold war white fiction—realist, Jewish, and systems—are woven together as never before in White Noise. And the novel would rapidly birth its own school, a DeLillo lineage of many long-lived branches. On the basis, essentially, of one book, in under a decade, he became to a new wave of writers what Faulkner had been for DeLillo’s own cohort: not merely a great author, but something like the sum of literary possibility itself.

Before examining White Noise (DeLillo’s eighth novel) directly, it’s worth the time to first relate it to its predecessors. Since his 1971 debut, Americana, he had been engaged in a prolonged attempt to fuse the outbound scope and force of the American social novel with the ascetic focus and abstraction of European existential fiction. Having come of age during the dreadful Fifties, having been trained by Jesuits “to be a failed ascetic” before transitioning into Madison Avenue copywriting, DeLillo was from the beginning most keenly aware that the stasis and numbness presented as displaced conundrums in The Stranger or Molloy were real, emergent properties of postwar screen culture and social life whose importance had yet to be artfully gauged.

His protagonists were white Americans; his drama, their attempts to leave their own society. Their sectors of activity (TV development, football, rock music, big science, Wall Street, covert ops) and their motives for withdrawal (art, disobedience, boredom, exhaustion) could vary. What held true was the streak of modernity, a self-conscious detachment from all modes of nostalgia and unguarded feeling. “I don’t want to hear a word about the value of one’s heritage,” an offensive lineman says in End Zone (1972). “I am a twentieth-century individual. I am working myself up to a point where I can exist beyond guilt, beyond blood, beyond the ridiculous past. Thank goodness for America. In this country there’s a chance to accomplish such a thing.” As ever, the tone of the stoic was clearly sincere, even while it doubled as a pretext for dark humor. In its topical fixation on the DEATH quintet (drugs, espionage, adultery, television, Hitler), in its deft curation of the age’s verbal flak and fallout, and especially in its blank-faced incitements to laughter, White Noise is without a doubt the culmination of DeLillo’s novels of the Seventies.

But these relatively superficial parallels belie a more profound reversal. The innovative aspects of The Names—the shift in the protagonist’s relation to society from renunciant to joiner, the presence of children, the plot geared toward action rather than paralysis, the tenderness, the candor—these are all preserved and developed still further.

Heinrich’s hairline is beginning to recede. I wonder about this. Did his mother consume some kind of genepiercing substance when she was pregnant? Am I at fault somehow?

Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval.

The truth is I don’t want to die first. Given a choice between loneliness and death, it would take me a fraction of a second to decide. But I don’t want to be alone either. Everything I say to Babette about holes and gaps is true. Her death would leave me scattered, talking to chairs and pillows.

Beneath the carapace of institutional bona fides lies a harried, baffled figure narrating his fantasies and crises in a semiconscious tone where poise and panic overlap. The absence of the stoic in Jack Gladney’s temperament, his enmeshment in and liability to social pressures, imbues him with the palpable presence required to keep the narration from folding too cleanly into Don DeLillo’s abstracted concerns. The famous chair in Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill is something of a fragile mess, but we all are at some level, and his honesty about his disarray soon renders him the most endearing and disturbing of the author’s leads to date. Bizarre as his existence and surroundings prove to be, this bond of character and reader founded on disheveled feeling anchors both in a reality at once berserk and wholly credible. Clear in delusion, deluded in clarity, Jack prevents us from drawing distinctions between mundane unease and extraordinary fear. He is, one cannot help but feel in hearing him so close, so little in control: he can neither live up to his “professional aura of power, madness and death” nor find a method to escape it. A lifetime of identifying with power has left him absolutely helpless—just as he leaves the reader absolutely helpless to deny it. The helplessness and fear, we find, comes with the job.

It’s not a question of good and evil. I don’t know what it is. Look at it this way. Some people always wear a favorite color. Some people carry a gun. Some people put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, safer. It’s in this area that my obsessions dwell.

Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd.

For all his mordant skepticism regarding the motives, tactics, speech acts, capabilities, and apparel of the Sixties left, DeLillo had always taken seriously its assertion that US society as it actually existed was indistinguishable from the ideal of an exceptionally prosperous and long-lived fascism. It’s no more a coincidence that “Hitler studies” is housed in the same campus building as the department of “American environments” than it was that the Nazis modeled their rallies on American football games, their race laws on American apartheid, or their geopolitics on American frontier expansion. One man’s Nazi German theory is another’s white American practice, and both of these men are Jack Gladney. What surges forth in Jack’s experience of the nation—college gatherings glimpsed as upscale fascist rallies, reading Mein Kampf at the Dinky Donut while his wife and her ex-husband catch up—is far from a call for political counterforce. It’s a profile of the supine human spirit framed as a taxonomy of language, overdubbed by an anthology of whiteness framed as a catalog of noise. The commercial gabble and the misremembered trivia, the portentous lectures and the genocidal shrieks, the desperate love, the still more desperate phobias, the murderous aggression phrased in balancing accounts and Heideggerian cant, the accented rants of the nuns without faith like oneself: where do they all lead one, if not toward death? However, in centering his existential narrative on Gladney’s spongelike consciousness, DeLillo is conducting, perhaps inadvertently, psychological tests with political undertones.

Jack’s partially cartoonish presentation doesn’t mask the salient features of his class identity. With his Annie Hall–ish intellectual walk-and-talks and his conjugal erotica readings, his self-aware, ecstatic shopping sprees and his hands-off parenting of a blended family, he is, in fact almost too recognizably, a symbol of the millions who defined the Sixties cultural revolution by deserting settled standards of white manhood to forge a separate persona based on secularism, expertise, experiment, permissiveness, discernment in consumption, self-pleasure, sexual freedom, and above all wit. His outstanding and outlandish occupation brings into relief a mentality more quietly and commonly shared: that of the faithless white male, cleverly distanced from white power’s classically violent icons but still basically dependent on its ambiance for individual validation. As the novel progresses, his fears of being unmanned, contaminated, and eternally deceased1 increase until the salves of everyday consumerism and professional esteem no longer relieve. Just unnerve him enough, take his woman away, put a gun in his hand: thus the glad man reverts to the jackbooted fascist agenda of curing his fears by applying brute force to the racialized Other.

The construction of the plot of White Noise, the consolidation of Reaganism, and the emergence of the modern neo-Nazi terror movement all took place in the US between 1983 and 1984. Couple these with more seasoned, parallel phenomena abroad such as Western Europe’s Gladio terrorists, South African apartheid, and Latin America’s death squads—all US-sponsored, obviously—and the novel’s timeliness looks plain. But the radical pattern DeLillo describes in his book only grazes on Reagan’s more elderly, churchgoing base or the naked fanatical hate of militiamen armed to the teeth. The fascistic tendencies that interest DeLillo in White Noise are latent, not blatant; not on the cold war’s hardened, booming front lines, but deep inside the soft unspoken heart of liberal whiteness. To give them credit, the secular professionals of Gladney’s generation—DeLillo’s own—were generally disgusted by the Eighties’ rightward turn. In relation to his time, Jack’s situation is anomalous to the point of being taken for a thought experiment or farce. Only in the long duration since the novel’s publication does his figure start to loom, crossing over the horizon of reality to approach us at an ever-faster rate.

TO TRUST IN A CONSPIRACY is to believe in balance. The expenditure of energy required to break from the official tale is underwritten by a sense that truth, unveiled, will turn the tide. Ironically, this is how actual conspirators (some surely must exist somewhere) conduct themselves as well. The effort of planning and acting in secret implies that it matters, is making some difference.

Literature is not conspiratorial thinking. It seeks to describe the real balance of power, not to tip it. And if literature could be read as a conspiracy, even a global one, it would still only be the weakest one of all. It reveals truths that have been obvious from the beginning of the world—the facts of the heart over time. Ideology and politics are not illusions, but literature takes care to translate them to common motives and emotions so as to weigh them fairly. It knows that the heart is the ultimate balance.

One might say that the naming of Libra, DeLillo’s 1988 successor to White Noise, is already suggestive of such knowledge, but it’s certain that a different balance is achieved by contrasting the two major works. Chronologically, the prophetic White Noise is opposed to Libra, a novel centered on the Kennedy assassination—as if, having already driven his futurist vision to final frontiers, the author had no place left to turn except for history. The articulate shambles of Jack Gladney’s first-person fugue are far from Libra’s limber, magisterial third-person narration based on assiduous documentary research, a free indirect style smoothly crossing over into more than twenty-five characters. Compared to White Noise, the keening of commercial propaganda has been muffled; meanwhile the faint hum of the foreign policy machine (Jack’s ex-wives all had ties to the intelligence community) is amplified, brought forcefully home. The stage of White Noise was a thin geography located in a nameless state, its sites generic almost to the point of allegory: Blacksmith, Iron City, Glassboro, Farmington, Watertown, Coaltown. Libra pitches the tent of its plot on the poles of twelve genuine cities in four countries including the pinnacles of all three cold war worlds: New York and Washington, Moscow and Minsk, Tokyo and Mexico City. And if the protagonist of White Noise is a drooping member of the professional middle classes whose prolonged exposure to Hitler particles helps prime him for the murder of a nonwhite cipher, Lee Harvey Oswald, Libra’s antiracist antihero, couldn’t be more different.

“You mentioned politics,” he said. “How far left is this young friend of yours?”

“There is politics, there is emotion, there is psychology. I know him quite well but I wouldn’t be completely honest if I said I could pin him down, pin him right to the spot. He may be a pure Marxist, the purest of believers. Or he may be an actor in real life. What I know with absolute certainty is that he’s poor, he’s dreadfully, grindingly poor. What’s the expression I want?”

“Piss-poor.”

More than half of Libra’s chapters are devoted to narrating from within Lee’s odd biography, a life which in its brief span rubs against a dizzying array of secret operations run by the planet’s best and brightest agencies. From his introduction as a teenage underdog more emotionally committed to the metal shriek of New York subway trains than to family, friends, or school, Lee longs to merge his being with a higher power manifesting as an underground machine. As McCarthyism peaks, he checks out Marxist scripture from the New Orleans library. He imagines joining a Communist cell, carrying out secret missions, taking on a revolutionary alias. To escape his overbearing single mother, her unquenchable fretting and harping, he enlists in the Marines. Stationed at Atsugi air base in Japan, he hangs with Tokyo leftists while off duty. Once his service overseas ends, he defects to the Soviet Union. He informs the KGB about the U-2 spy plane’s powers and a false defector program run by United States naval intelligence. Soon disillusioned with Soviet society, he defects back with curious ease. “Trotsky is the pure form,” Lee now thinks in Fort Worth, New Orleans, Dallas. He still believes in Castro, still wants to strike a pure blow for the cause. But he has a wife and baby daughter to support, the jobs he finds pay poorly, and he’s known to authorities. The FBI bullies, the CIA baits him: to work, to inform. Whose side is Lee on? He agrees with everyone and goes his own weird way.

The broad cast of characters in Libra, a function of its lead’s mobility and mutability, provides DeLillo with a chance to deploy what might be called the institutional imagination. He characterizes not only individuals, but through them their organizations. His FBI agents and Mafia eminences have a family resemblance: both radiate a kind of blunt, bullish authority in common, only the wise guys have more humor, an earthy kick in their linguistics that demands and rewards being read out aloud. (“Speaking of Cuba, a couple of weeks ago I dream I’m swimming on the Capri roof with Jack Ruby. The next day I’m on Bourbon Street, who do I fucking see? You talk about coincidence.”) Oswald’s KGB inquisitor, a Marxist stalwart, thinks in terms of the collective underdog and indulges in self-conscious paranoia for a living: “Despite all the tests and interviews, we may know less about him than he knows about us.” CIA has a sleekness to it, a dominating grip as shadowy as it is steady. In Libra one is educated to the continuity of human personality in vast impersonal systems. Few novels go as far toward individuating the 20th century, systems and all.

He has thought about us—whoever we are—more than we have thought about him.

Tweet

Anchoring his fiction on the floor of real events, DeLillo frees himself to sift the tides of daily being for the indelible patterns of emotion that constitute identity. However chilling their designs, Libra’s three fictional CIA renegades come off as warm-blooded, men of real feeling. With his bookish temperament and suburban/academic setting, his deep attachment to his family and his ineradicable fear of death, Win Everett seems a prior avatar of Jack Gladney even when he doesn’t plan a shooting. Laurence Parmenter’s class, the smug sophistication and assurance that comes from being “part of the Groton-Yale-OSS network of so-called gentlemen spies,” manifests in knowing, droll exchanges between him and his wife. T. J. Mackey, the cowboy of the bunch, has burned through a marriage already: mistrustful and hardened, pulling lesser but like-minded men into his orbit, he sees himself as what he is without regret, “a man they used to pay to teach other men the fundamentals of deadly force.”

DeLillo’s attention to terror was hardly exclusive to right-wingers: he knew how violence and the threat of violence from the left formed crucial variables, however overshadowed, in the social equations defining cold war. Explosive characters identifying as anticapitalist shape the plots of Players, Running Dog, and The Names—they drive James Axton out of Athens once his cover’s blown. If Gladney’s path in White Noise illustrates the basic helplessness that fascist subjectivity roots in, Oswald’s odyssey in Libra plays out the dark potential for discovering one’s true self via Leninist initiative. To take stands against the behemoth of racist American capital takes uncommon commitment: Oswald is resilient, brave. But having spine is hardly proof against being pretentious, misguided, and poor. As Oswald’s schemes to enter history by paying back the President for America’s attempts to put down revolutionary Cuba start coinciding with the CIA rogues’ plot to pay back Kennedy for failing those attempts, the ideal of violent justice loses all heroic luster in the reader’s sight. The meaningful division in the world looks less like right or left—more like murder or life.

Wise, grand, and tender, DeLillo’s narration grasps all that aspiring assassins cannot. Through the eyes of his supporting characters, especially the wives, he perceives the vitality, hope, and delight of the Sixties before the killings turned them to “the Sixties.” “You could be happy now,” imagines Mary Frances, Win Everett’s wife, basking in the Texas suburbs of late spring. Parmenter’s wife Beryl thinks it possible to live “layered safely in, out of the reach of dizzying things.” Oswald’s Russian wife Marina is thrilled simply by the sight of neon, or walking through a Safeway: “The packages of frozen food. The colors and abundance.” The stolid forms and grisly energies of early postwar life did not preclude authentic elements of innocence and cheer amid prosperity; as he describes these childlike qualities, DeLillo underscores their loss. If an axiom can be distilled from Libra’s ramifying plots, it must be this: the more a character’s mentality approaches that of a child, the deeper the assassination wounds them. The book does not just clarify the killing as a cruel, inevitable outcome of cold war logic. In DeLillo’s hands, it serves as a Rosetta stone to translate all the towering machinery of that epoch into a simple principle: death’s relentless incarnation in the childish heart of daily life. Thus the novel concludes not with Kennedy or Oswald but with Oswald’s funeral as filtered through the testimony of his mother Marguerite, more childish even than children, her indefatigable drive to clear her boy’s name manifesting as a cataract of grief and grievance, an investigative frenzy, fragments of Greek tragedy with the Warren Commission standing in as silent chorus.

I am going through a death and it is hard.

I have a sixth sense, judge. People have remarked on my ESP. If Lee Harvey Oswald shot the President, why didn’t I know it at the time? It is a prevalent feeling every mother has when the phone rings and she knows it is her son. Why didn’t I sense he was in a window with a gun when the shots rang out? Even being his gun doesn’t mean he did the shooting. I will wear a camera. I will time his movements on the fatal day. I am ready to go round and round on this because there are stories inside stories, that the press is unaware.

My only education is my heart. I have to work into this in my own way, starting with the day I took him home from the Old French Hospital in New Orleans. I am reciting a life and I need time.

In the end, the scales of Libra’s title refer less to a court of law than to the fluctuating life that law attempts to bind. The novel is not a space where innocence and guilt can be assessed with certainty, nor is it, for all its tremendous political literacy, in any way polemic. What it attempts to do, and magnificently succeeds in doing, is to chart the myriad ambiguities of a life lived in interaction with different-minded systems, and to set that life forth as a valid symbol of historic life itself. Oswald is “a study in divided loyalties or in the irrelevance of loyalty”: he can’t make up his mind about what he stands for, and can’t tell who he’s ultimately working for. He splits the difference between purity and complicity, conspirator and scapegoat, adult and child, toughness and fragility, idiot and genius, transparency and impenetrability. As with so many in the 20th century, with him the only thing for sure is that he wants to join. Yet once enlisted, his peculiarity and particularity are such as to disrupt the steady operation of whatever scheme in which he’s being deployed. Bartleby aboard the Pequod: this is the paradox of Oswald, and the wildcard status it confers on him in spite of everything irradiates the other figures in the novel—redefines them, their affiliations, and their era in his indeterminable image. One opens the book wondering which one of their sides he’s on and concludes it half-suspecting that they’re all on his.

As the Soviet Union flickered out during the Eighties, the Marxist militancy that it sponsored faded too. In both practice and theory, conspiracies of violent transformation from the left soon ceased to be: the win over apartheid could not efface more general failure in Berlin, Managua, Addis Ababa, Kabul, Moscow. By resurrecting Oswald with its art to bury him again, Libra doubled as a farewell to the dying cold war balance that his life revealed. In its treatment of the bloody past—with great compassion and without the least nostalgia—it defined the only path for peace in years to come.

IN 1922, THE SOVIET POET and cultural historian Osip Mandelstam published an essay on “The Nineteenth Century” which concluded with a forecast of the 20th. “In the veins of our century there flows the heavy blood of extremely distant monumental cultures,” Mandelstam announced; faced with “this new age, turned cruel and immense,” artists were challenged to “humanize the twentieth century, to make it glow with a theological warmth.” Like much else vibrant in the Soviet Twenties, the poet and his ambitious program met a brutal end. Still, the situation he defined did not end with his life, nor was it restricted to his homeland. The defining feature of the 20th century was the worldwide maturation of administrative structures that, in dwarfing and depersonalizing the individual, disrupted all the settled certainties of art conducted on a human scale. There was no way to hide: what the modernist artist would make of the systems in art was conditioned by all that the systems were making of them, and their world.

The systems were made to wage war with each other, and did. In the wars’ intermissions, the artists made art that reflected the warfare, for better or worse. By the end of the Eighties, a singular outcome emerged. Of the two major systems, one was doomed to collapse very soon: bankrupt in all senses of the word, crippled by unprecedented peaceful people’s movements, it had nothing left to do except set fire to its final violent legacies and sink into the waters of oblivion. The other one, endowed with wealth, willpower, and the highest intelligence, had proven its fitness by thriving through years riddled with apocalyptic perils elsewhere on the planet. Its bold and wise administration of its many interests guaranteed that, in the coming new world order, its preeminence would be unrivaled. And among its most brilliant crown jewels were the dozens of artistic prodigies that had emerged under its auspices during the fateful decade.

Of the creators of these films, songs, paintings, television shows, poems, short stories, and novels, few were less suited or eager for fame, and none more unprepared for it, than Don DeLillo. With scarcely any intermission between composing White Noise and plunging into Kennedy assassination research, he had spent the Eighties hard at work on writing, in the sort of relative obscurity with which he was contented since his days as an unpublished author. Resurfacing near decade’s end to see how Libra fared, he found himself confined in a polemic hurricane. Taking time out from supporting George Bush in the impending 1988 election, George Will, heavyweight influencer of the established right, devoted his Washington Post op-ed column to broadsiding Libra. The book was senseless, irresponsible left speculation; its author was guilty of the crimes of “literary vandalism and bad citizenship.”

The message was clear: Having published consecutive prize-winning best-selling books that dismantled conservative national narratives, DeLillo was significant enough to warrant an extended public flaying. Be it phrased as infamy or celebration, fame would haunt him henceforth, injecting an unwelcome presence into his life and an unstable theme into his art. Could he have asked for any of this? Because his masterpieces challenged readers with their formal intricacy, controversial content, and above all discretion of tone, they triggered releases of simpleton critical bile with Pavlovian consistency: after two major works, his worst haters were already primed to combust from their rage. Meanwhile, his most devoted acolytes, typically talented writers themselves, considered him something like a god on Earth. For the quarter century from Reagan’s reelection to the Great Recession, the surest way to orient oneself in the entire US literary field would be to take a stand on Don DeLillo’s reputation. He became, himself, the kind of polarized public material about which he preferred to write.

The DeLillo referendum was unequal to the point of deep frustration. On the occasions when they weren’t reduced to sputtering epithets (“stupid—just plain stupid,” raged Dale Peck in the New Republic), the novelist’s foes were reduced to purveying demonstrable lies: that he’s “not especially good with character and plot” and focused on “sterile philosophizing” (Laura Miller), that “there are no human beings” (James Wood) in his books, that his characters lack “any genuine humanity” (Jonathan Yardley). Between these educators of the dull and the contenders for DeLillo’s genius there could be no significant contest. Stalinist debate clubs would have been more competitive.

The irony, however, should one happen to review the accolades bestowed on Don DeLillo by many of his literary fans, is that they bear clear traces of a cult of personality themselves. When the novelist is framed as “a tower of remoteness and command and intellect” (Jonathan Franzen), possessed with “oracular foresight” (David Foster Wallace), what sort of man is this, if man he be? By the time one hears out Martin Amis praising his “high intellect and harsh originality,” or scans Christian Lorentzen declaiming how he’s “more interested in probing the limits of consciousness and perception than in sketching inner lives,” or views Jonathan Lethem ambivalent, balking from DeLillo’s “chilly, intellectual grandeur,” the Great Leader vibes start to seem unmistakable. Still in the end it takes another GL to, as the phrase goes, seal the deal:

DeLillo is a tough guy. He has no patience for what doesn’t apply. It is cold, but it is a coldness one delights in. It’s part of what gives you the frisson you are reading for in DeLillo. That chilling knowing becomes a comfort in itself. One is warmed by the absolute correctness of it. In this respect he is our most visionary writer.

Already, by the Eighties, the fanatic proselytizer of a frigid cult of language centered on himself,2 DeLillo’s longtime crony Gordon Lish was certain to expound the virtues of a dictator of ice—impervious, untouchable, supreme. What’s striking about the contempt and the awe for DeLillo is how they refer to the same cold motifs. The man’s inaccessible thinking, his soulless and heartless approach to existence, is taken for granted. All that remains is to value it. More striking still is how this image fails to correspond in the least with the author DeLillo became in the Eighties. No intelligent person can experience The Names, White Noise, and Libra and conclude that their author is lacking in warmth, much less hostile to life on an everyday plane.

Where did the disjunction between the author and his image start? It’s one of the profounder ironies of literary history. White Noise, the novel that made DeLillo’s fame with younger readers by proving that TV an sich could be the subject of a literary masterpiece, introduces them to the author’s formidable yet lesser back catalog. From there, an image of the author is extracted that appeals to their secular, TV-besotted, and professionally anxious selves more than the actually existing author ever could. And these processes—the replacement of originals with their more emotionally gratifying images, the tendency for secular, TV-besotted, and professionally anxious selves to crowd beneath the images of great white men instead of facing up to the fear of insignificance and death alone—are precisely the materials of which White Noise is made. It is easier to identify with a hologram of Don DeLillo than to see yourself as Jack Gladney. What DeLillo describes as “our willingness to abandon ourselves to a strong personality” in “Silhouette City: Hitler, Manson and the Millennium,” a 1989 essay on fascist tendencies in Western culture, helpfully included in the LOA edition—this willingness is not restricted to the Nazis, neo-Nazis, and medieval cults that he discusses. As Mao II made clear, DeLillo saw the same impulse at work inside the mechanics of literary celebrity itself. The issue was what he could make of it besides just giving in.

I DIDN’T MUCH LIKE MAO II when I read it first. It’s not a masterpiece. The tone is leaden and the plot’s a whimper; still, even a reasonably clever teen boy could sense seriousness on the part of the author, and that’s what I was. The World Trade Center buildings had collapsed a couple years prior, clear proof of terrorists twisting the Western world’s narrative, just like the book said. The attack had become an excuse to wage war. I didn’t know much, but I hated the war. Something was wrong with my country, I had time to think. I lived in the suburbs, was heading to college. What more could I know? No one told me anything. I liked TV, the internet, lifting weights, CDs, and books; also, video games.

Mao II is supposedly about crowds. The future belongs to them. But the book’s reality, what it feels like over every page, is the protagonist’s depression over being a famous novelist. He prefers death to fame, and he dies. I still knew nothing about death, depression, or fame, so the book was inert. But I liked Don DeLillo, the name. It sounded like the Mafia. The Mafia was cool. It had the sense of Marlon Brando, Al Pacino. It was important to be cool, and you became cool by getting close to cool things: that was the thinking of people. I had thought Mao II was going to be about Mao. Mao, whom my parents called Old Mao, had started the Cultural Revolution, which some in the West thought was cool. I knew it was an evil time my parents lived through, but he died, it ended, and they went to school again. In the Eighties they moved to America. Two decades later, I was driving a convertible on cheap gas. The whole world seemed to say: You cannot touch me and you never will. I did my best to say it, too.

Some time after, not long, at the same Barnes and Noble, I chose to read White Noise. One year later I owned all his books and suspected I was meant to be a writer. Literature, I found, was like a high school. Certain people hang out with each other; there is gossip and grades. I read The Corrections and Infinite Jest; I read Pynchon from V up to Gravity’s Rainbow. Perusing the internet, I discovered that these books were called “systems novels” (because they were about the System); that certain critics greeted “systems novels” with vituperation; that certain critics liked them and aspired to be their authors. These people, of course, were all white, were all part of a system, but what can you do? Time comes for us all. Not everything cool or important remains as it is. The literary culture of the Aughts would dissipate, as if to say: Keep working and engaging and the tide will turn. The best words care for something other than mere coolness, and they always win out in the end—remember Melville, Faulkner, Ellison, DeLillo, Morrison.

Twenty years later, and almost unwittingly, it’s with Toni Morrison that I discover what I sought but never tracked down ever since the station wagons pulled up for another fall semester at the College-on-the-Hill: words equal to the power in Don DeLillo’s works. “They clamor, it seems, for an attention that would yield the meaning that lies in their positioning, their repetition, and their strong suggestion of paralysis and incoherence; of impasse and non-sequitur.” Discussing, in her 1992 study Playing in the Dark, the repeated figurations of impenetrable whiteness that stand out from the canon’s white American works, Morrison also produced a pitch-perfect summation of tensions that animate all of DeLillo’s protagonists. How whiteness performs as a symbol in Poe’s or in Hemingway’s tales has become, for DeLillo, the story itself. And when Morrison later concludes that “whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable,” it’s hard not to observe a deep concurrence with the dominating public image of DeLillo set forth by worshipers and haters both. If a serious novelist clarifies primary questions that vex their society, and if one of those questions involves the captivity of whiteness and various attempts to break free, then it seems a fitting judgment from the System’s critics that the mode of captivity known as the archetype “The Great White Writer” snare the only white man who has phrased the question fully in the six decades since JFK’s assassination.

To be widely known yet scarcely understood might be considered a success for actors, businessmen, or politicians; for a serious author it could only register as harsh defeat. The sense of Underworld as swan song, abdication—“Peace,” goes the last word and sentence—and the diminished horizon and joy of the books ever since, may not be attributable only to the termination of the cold war dualism that DeLillo thrived on.3 There may be a more personal factor involved, that of a novelist who gave his very best only to be disappointed—hurt, even—by the thoughtless scorn and admiration of the audience that ensued. The changes in contemporary society are not so drastic, nor has DeLillo’s soul grown so inflexible, that more ambitious labors should be past his reach. (If someone ever writes a classic novel covering professional video gaming [“e-sports”], it will be him.) What may be lacking isn’t so much talent or material as the motivation born from the hope—and the Eighties were especially rich in hope—that one will be read with the same care that one takes in writing.

Beneath the carapace of Don DeLillo’s institutional bona fides is a fantastic legend still worth telling. It pursues a young man from the outer city who, entirely on his own initiative, discovers the magic of novels—he’s awed by them, unfathomably hit. Their uncanny transportation, their rhythms of desire and loss, their intelligent drive into zones of the heart shunned by official discourse: all captivate him and inspire in him a life superior to the crude though not unpleasant routines of his daily world. Through war, political assassinations, and cultural revolution, the legend tracks a personal, not merely general, loss of faith in every institution: the Church, corporations, the media, political parties, armed forces, the nation-state, gender, and whiteness especially. More than this, though, the legend involves the discovery of one’s own involvement in all these systems regardless. Even though one needs to leave them, one cannot. Only the novel remains and is sure. The novel is the final form of truth. Still, in order to complete itself, this truth must take into account its own confinement and confess, however gracefully, its own accommodation—the nature that it shares with the destructive world of men.

There are good things as well. He will learn what it is to be happily married. He will learn, in an alien city, stripped of an unbending confidence, how to be open to the fragile side of being. He will become a great writer! And even if few understand him, the fact remains that he has thought about us—whoever we are—more than we have thought about him. If for most, art is only a game, for him it’s the only game. Beyond the lethal, petrifying image, he has his just reward: if language is the last truth and the truth is what survives, he lives forever. After him, what more have we to say?

ABSENCE OF VANITY; unceasing self-guided research in the era’s most colorful art forms; relentless focus on the texture and rhythm of words; challenging choice of material; fearlessness facing historical presences; apprehension of both power and powerlessness; taking death and world religion deadly serious—the ideal path to being a writer and the path that Don DeLillo took are one. This is his legacy, proof of the timeless imperative to live in one’s time.

Still, times change. In the Reagan years white Christian fundamentalism was felt by its enemies, and felt itself, to be a temporarily dethroned regime of culture with the potential for full restoration. The institutions of the corporatist state, solidified by cold war pressures, still commanded respectful attention from all—if only out of fear of thermonuclear annihilation. An infernal upsurge of the flagrantly uncool forced culture’s repo men and women to concoct new countermeasures to oppose them. (Entire corpuses of literary fiction were founded on coping with the awful TV of the Eighties.) The cultural summits of the Eighties are even more impressive for their prominence than for their elevation: beneath every Olympian crest, every Prince or Twin Peaks, slumbered hundreds of sulfurous piles.

The artists of the Eighties acted fast. They had to: there would be no future otherwise. But in battling the retrograde Reaganite look of the System, they knew they were its bastards nonetheless. They took on organized religion by altering its iconography, not destroying it. Consensus uncoolness, delivered through media, was countered by coolness more media-fluent. Faced with dead forms, they formed live ones in their image. You, too, have become a zombie; all the more reason to dance better than the others. I’m a government man. I am chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. The evil Frank Booth, in Blue Velvet, looks straight at the camera: “You’re like me,” he says. You’re part of what you fight: it’s the acceptance of this fact that breathes a spirit of unsqueamishness, engagement, and humility—the beauty of a dark truth brought to light—into the best art of the flagrant Eighties.

What the Eighties possessed is precisely what culture in our time is missing: a balance. Regardless of political administrations, the cultural changes unsealed in the Sixties have continued to progress: by now the contests between cool and uncool, libertarian and structural, and religious and secular are too lopsided to deserve the name. Religions, structures, and uncoolness have yet to vanish from the earth. Culture and reality are not the same. But culture and ideals are closely linked, and the prevailing ideal for the past sixty years, growing stronger with every new cohort of youth, is cool, libertarian, and secular, all to the point of consumerist digital death. White Noise, in 2023, is not only some myopic retread of the more banal aesthetic tricks from Eighties movies (though unfortunately, it’s that too). It’s a novel we live in—and yet not entirely, because we have art like White Noise. (Perhaps the scariest aspect of the novel’s setting was the total lack of artworks, set against the omnipresence of aesthetics, vibes, waves, auras, radiation.)

As if in compensation for how politics today amounts to little more than slow-mo sumo between liberal and reactionary capitalist parties, people have more access to great art than ever. The problem, however, is that we possess more Jack Gladneys than ever as well. Jack is a creature constituted by his insecurities, and neoliberalism means nothing if not insecurity for all. After many decades of the white man in America losing ground—in society quite slowly, in culture much faster—DeLillo’s latent archetype, his patient zero of American secular fascism, has spawned into real life, is becoming a nation of millions. Jack’s ludicrous symptoms, his ghoulish temptations now grow ever more common and prominent. His fantasies of a transcendent death, framed as the closing shots of a TV biography of Attila the Hun, are moronic; yet insipid holograms of a historical fantasy held up as glorious ideals (the Bronze Age, Tolkien, traditionalist Catholicism, the cold war) are intellectual currency in general circulation now. “Not everyone spoke English at the cash terminals, or near the fruit bins and frozen foods, or out among the cars in the lot”—coming from a late-middle-aged Hitler scholar terrified of his impending permanent demise, this already encapsulated, decades in advance, the future politics of neoliberal immigration. Jack’s unwarranted wariness in front of Asian kids, professionals, and industrial products is absurd; still, it presages all the envious, whinging hostility toward “the Chinese” typical of fascist ideologues today. (Why can’t we have an efficient dictator to battle theirs?) It’s beyond preposterous when Jack attempts to take shelter from his own inadequacies by kneeling at the image of a garrulous secular racist celebrity who’s also a historically proven, capital-L Loser. Fashioning facsimiles of cool through allusions to Nazi insignia. Reconciling liberty and structure through sadistic plots. Blending faith and secular identity in a materialist cult of personality. Hiding from death by inflicting it. It’s all too hysterical to make up real life, and still part of our world.

All this is held back less by moral qualms than by imperatives of economic growth and geopolitics; so far it has been, but it’s hard to be sure that it always will be. As screen culture advances, the avid viewers’ nerves become more vulnerable and tenderized, more easily influenced. The seas of white male insecurity keep rising. The agitprop foundations are already laid: the Jacks have bylines, thrive on mastheads, dribble memes. Apartheid legacies own social media. One’s political options are limited. Why hide the fact? But as far as art goes, one should look out for Jack. There’s a radioactive crater near the center of the culture where the white man used to stand. It’s best not to be squeamish and pretend that it will vanish with enough ignoring; best to take it as material for creative exploration and re-presentation. Like the Man in Lana Del Rey’s music or Cooper’s evil twin in Twin Peaks: The Return, Jack, too, is America, and his logic should be faced and understood, if only to be rooted out inside oneself. True art proffers no solutions, only a perfect phrasing of the questions: it’s here that, regardless of color,4 DeLillo can still be of service.

We may never attain to the patience and poise of an old soul whose childhood precedes TV’s rise, but the curve of his thought and career can prefigure our own, even now. Steeped in existential literature, DeLillo in the early Sixties had arrived already where we are today. In the silence or absence of God he committed himself to a cult of singularity revealed through a decisive style. Yet his journey to the Old World led to new turns in his thought, if not a full reversal. As The Names’s leads can’t help but notice in their travels, language throughout Greece and Asia is continually invested with sacred intention. “The river of language is God”: where scripture and prayers abound, the worship of language is close. His emergence into greatness coincides with a discreet relinquishment of secular self-will and a partaking in religious speech: James Axton’s last words are “Our offering is language.” However opposed in their style, White Noise and Libra are Dostoevskian novels, fueled by ideology. Both interrogate secular axioms by putting them into political action, thereby proving their tragic inadequacy. By the time of Underworld DeLillo is announcing in the New York Times—a bastion of secularism—that “at its root level, fiction is a kind of religious fanaticism, with elements of obsession, superstition and awe.”

Do you have to believe with DeLillo to see where he’s headed? Perhaps it’s some sort of—peculiarly encoded, no doubt—childhood faith resurfacing in old age. Perhaps it’s what a serious writer in a world that’s not is driven to to justify his task. Perhaps it’s just the truth. In any case, his statement, like his novels, exemplifies the “theological warmth” Osip Mandelstam predicted would be necessary to “humanize the twentieth century,” and maybe the 21st too. However they believe or fail to, writers are the bridges binding one world to the next. The dream of total literacy begins and ends with them. It doesn’t matter when it is: Should you be asked How many languages do you speak? among the tongues Religious, Secular, Structural, Libertarian, Cool, Uncool, Good, and Evil, then the answer should be Yes.

As if to reveal Jack’s precarious condition by contrast, White Noise’s only religious believers are also its only Black characters: a family of Jehovah’s Witnesses completely unfazed by the Airborne Toxic Event. “God Jehovah’s got a bigger surprise than this in store,” the wife predicts to Jack’s wife. The husband asks Jack how Jack plans to spend his resurrection—casually, “as though asking about a long weekend coming up.” ↩

No less than the Ayatollah Khomeini, Lish may well be a hidden influence on The Names: the cult is something like a sicko writing workshop, when you think about it. ↩

Note how in two of his three masterpieces, Libra and Underworld, the bivalence has been crystallized into the very titles. ↩

Without saying too much on the topic, it bears some importance that, out of the authors inspired by DeLillo, those of color learned best how to take what they need while dispelling anxieties of influence. ↩

## Why Boredom Matters

(firstthings.com) October 2023

Elizabeth C. Corey is associate professor of political science in the Honors Program at Baylor University.

*Why Boredom Matters: Education, Leisure, and the Quest for a Meaningful Life* by kevin hood gary cambridge, 200 pages, $29.99

Conservative commentators have long bemoaned the proliferation of “studies” fields in the university. Women’s and gender studies are well known, but now students can take courses in topics as unusual as “surf studies” and “fat studies.” Given all the boring lectures that undergraduates have endured throughout the ages, it’s amusing to note that this list now includes “boredom studies,” for which there is even a journal—the Journal of Boredom Studies. Anyone who has ever attended an academic conference will find some humor in its call for papers: “Submit a proposal for the 5th boredom conference.”

Much of this literature runs to the mundane or quantitative, but Kevin Hood Gary’s insightful book reflects his immersion in theology, philosophy, and literature. This is really a book about liberal education, as indicated by its subtitle: “Education, Leisure, and the Quest for a Meaningful Life.” If boredom is the problem, Gary argues, then the solution is learning how to be leisurely, in the classical sense.

It might be slightly misleading to say that the book is about a problem and its solution. In the tradition that runs from Aristotle through Aquinas to Josef Pieper, leisure is not a solution to anything, but an alternative way of being in the world. In Pieper’s formulation, leisure “runs at right angles” to the practical pursuits of work and achievement.

Following Pieper, Gary argues that we have become slaves to work and amusement, even though neither pursuit is truly fulfilling. Money and honor, the traditional rewards of work, do not satisfy because money begets the need for more money and honor is fleeting. Even pleasure is tiresome after a while. Who, in the waning days of a vacation, has not itched to get back to a “normal” routine?In reaching the limits of work and pleasure alike we are prone to boredom, disillusionment, and depression. Gary proposes that leisure and liberal education can remedy these unpleasant states. I agree. But the escape from boredom may require a still more radical transformation of will, and that transformation may be something we cannot accomplish by ourselves. I shall say more about this below.

Gary identifies different kinds and degrees of boredom. He first considers “situational boredom,” a state of mind that comes and goes and is usually related to a lack of agency. Every parent has heard the complaint of a child—“I’m so bored. What can I doooo?”—and answers are always deemed insufficient, no matter how many or how creative. The cure comes only in being swept up by some external force or in independently determining a course of action. Just as a person cannot be talked out of serious depression or anxiety, rational arguments against boredom seldom avail. A person must take interest in something, which requires initiative and energy.

Adults, in contrast, are too busy to be bored in the ways we were as children. If we find ourselves in a long line at the DMV or the post office, we chalk up our bad moods to impatience or overcommitment, not boredom. True situational boredom requires a significant stretch of time with no obligations, chosen or otherwise, and no electronic devices. When, now, is this likely to happen?

Yet many adolescents and adults are prone to a different and more serious kind of boredom, which Heidegger described as “existential.” Existential boredom is “characterized by a disenchantment with life and a struggle to find meaning,” writes Gary. This is a serious, fundamental boredom—closely related to ideas of despair, acedia, and ennui—that does not go away when circumstances change but permeates all of life as an “unsettledness or aimless restlessness.” A person who is existentially bored wonders why ordinary activities (like eating or making the bed) are worth doing since they must be done again the next day, why long-term projects should ever be undertaken since they seem so overwhelming, and perhaps implicitly why life is worth living at all. Such a person is tired and indifferent. Boredom—with its utter lack of interest, its humid, midday grayness—is a constant, unwanted companion.

Gary guides his readers through philosophical, literary, and theological sources as context for the modern experience of boredom—from the meaninglessness described in Ecclesiastes through the aimless “flitters” of democratic societies in Plato’s Republic to Evagrius, a fourth-century Christian monk who analyzed acedia. Gary examines Kierkegaard’s two notions of despair—of possibility and of ­necessity—and wrestles with the concern that “boredom-avoidance schemes,” to borrow Walker Percy’s phrase, exacerbate the larger problem of existential boredom. Heidegger hoped that cultivating a sense of authenticity might offer a permanent escape from existential boredom, but Gary is skeptical. He also discusses the movie Groundhog Day and ­David ­Foster Wallace’s essay, “Shipping Out,” a damning indictment of the so-called leisure industry.

Both kinds of boredom—situational and existential—are problematic, but the solution to the first intensifies the second. In various boredom-avoidance schemes, we escape situational boredom: While on tedious Zoom meetings, we doodle, eat, watch video clips, and scroll through social media. These activities offer temporary relief. The problem is that one thereby becomes the kind of person who doodles, eats, watches videos, and scrolls through social media. Our brains respond to these immediate forms of gratification, and sustained concentration is increasingly difficult.

This jumping from stimulus to stimulus is directly at odds with what is required to overcome existential boredom. Overcoming it requires deep, sustained thought about life’s purpose. It also demands concentration and perseverance in conceiving and completing long-term projects, because the most rewarding human activities are not quick or easy. They ask that we work through boredom instead of avoiding it.

One might even understand existential boredom as a wake-up call: Why does nothing seem interesting, everything dull and gray? The answer might be not that the world is boring, but that we ourselves are dull, shallow, and malformed. This ignorance and lack of formation is partly due to the usual suspects of modern culture—vacuous television programs, electronic devices in general, the advertising industry—but we have allowed these influences to shape us. It doesn’t have to be this way. Thus do we arrive at Gary’s therapy for boredom: liberal education understood as the practice of leisure.

If directed by an inspired teacher, a liberal education offers the (willing) student a vision of a better life, an expansion of the imagination, and escape from the tyranny of trivialities. “We can wander through this world,” writes Roger Scruton, “alienated, resentful, full of suspicion and distrust. Or we can find our home here. . . . The experience of beauty guides us along this second path.” In becoming alive to beauty in its myriad forms—moral, intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic—one cultivates a disposition to delight in the “uselessness” of contemplation. The French writer Maurice de Guérin describes this as “letting [the] soul wander at will, living in idleness, but in a contemplative idleness open to all impressions.”

Leisured contemplation, however, requires setting aside everyday priorities. The idea is decidedly anti-modern and, in some respects, even anti-human: We engage in contemplation only insofar as there is a “divine element” within us, as Aristotle writes in the Nicomachean Ethics. It asks that we suspend attempts to improve the self and the world. As essayist Agnes Repplier observed in 1893, leisure is a “special form of activity, employing all our faculties . . . it is from his leisure that [a person] constructs the true fabric of self.” This countercultural activity may issue in an entirely new self-understanding, offering exhortations, even commands: Don’t be slaves to the world’s current standards of value! Pursue insight, live differently, make meaningful art, and build healthy local cultures! Resist becoming part of the world of total work!

If this attractive vision of life is in principle available to anyone who wants it—and if it is the antidote to boredom—then why don’t more people pursue liberal education and a contemplative, leisured life? Why, despite the efforts of thoughtful authors like Gary, do the vast majority of American undergraduates persist in majoring in fields like nutritional science and supply chain management?

The conventional response is that liberal education is an expensive luxury. Since college tuition is so high, students and their parents expect a tangible return on investment. A somewhat different response takes for granted the value system of contemporary America: The aim of life is to make a difference, change the world, save the planet, transform politics. Achievement is the measure of a life well-lived. But leisure and liberal education do not necessarily or directly contribute to this vision. They may even oppose it.

For although liberal education can have the salutary effect of producing good statesmen, citizens, and workers, this is not its primary aim. Someone who reads and loves novels is also apt to be a good reader of legal briefs and corporate reports; yet a love of reading is not essentially related to these practical tasks. Like liberal education understood broadly, reading is an intrinsic good. The practical outcomes that may result from it are always contingent and secondary, always subject to examination and revision.

In fact, liberal education asks people to approach all tasks and careers with equanimity and a certain disinterest. Is it best to be a lawyer, a politician, or a priest? A musician or an artist? The answer to these questions—and to so many others—is: It depends. The liberally educated person has been freed to ask and answer these questions for himself.

A more arresting response to “Why not leisure and liberal education?” has to do with the very structure of human desires. The American neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp found that of all human orientations, the most enjoyable is that of “seeking” or working toward a satisfaction. This seeking is even more pleasant than the consummation of a desire or possession of a desired object. In planning a party, for example, we are filled with purpose and anticipation; the pursuit of a romantic interest gives life energy and vitality; even in gambling and lotteries the thrill is not exactly in winning or losing but in wagering.

The point is that most of us, most of the time, crave excitement and purpose. Lacking those things, we incline not toward contemplation, stillness, and leisure but toward boredom. Oscar Wilde illustrates this fact in an anecdote from The Picture of Dorian Gray: “A certain philanthropist . . . spent twenty years of his life in trying to get some grievance redressed, or some unjust law altered. . . . Finally he succeeded, and nothing could exceed his disappointment. He had absolutely nothing to do, [and] almost died of ennui.”

The bitter truth is that we modern Americans are privileged to have enormous potential for leisure and liberal education; yet we cannot seem to understand or desire it. Our spare time is filled with distraction and amusement, not meaningful activity. Is there any way out of this predicament?

Gary suggests that we cannot think our way out of boredom but must rather act in ways that change us. He offers three directives for leisure: Become an apprentice, cultivate a spirit of study, and remember our epiphanies. In apprenticeship, one gives oneself over to a master, which requires both trust and patience. Anyone who has studied a musical instrument or a language knows that in the beginning much is boring and sometimes even embarrassing—learning the vocabulary, memorizing the notes on the staff, practicing scales, awkwardly trying to speak or play. Yet as skill develops, one sees intrinsic goods that were not evident at the outset. These goods appear only after significant time has been invested in the practice. A student must have faith that his mentor both knows things and cares about his learning.

The cultivation of “a spirit of study” is related to this kind of apprenticeship. The spirit Gary recommends is something akin to the faculty of intellectus, which is decidedly not the calculative, deductive, and intentional use of reason as ratio. Intellectus is receptive, appreciative, and calm in its willingness to look, trust, and be acted upon. A. G. Sertillanges observes that the intellect, “taking it all in all, [is] a passive faculty; one is intellectually strong in proportion as one is receptive.” How foreign this idea is to the modern university, where reason is so often a weapon or a point of pride.

Finally, Gary recommends that we “remember our epiphanies,” advice he gives not so much to young people just starting out as to those of us who have been around for a while. Boredom results not only from continuous distraction or youthful ignorance but also from jadedness about the world. Remembering our epiphanies means recollecting the first time we saw something in nature or perceived a philosophical truth. It means recalling our first meaningful musical performance or skillful painting, that long-ago sudden insight into the mind of another person, or our first falling in love. We must keep hold of epiphanies like these if we do not want to turn into boring, disenchanted old people ourselves.

I think Gary ultimately has it right: The cure for existential boredom must be a certain kind of liberal or “freeing” education, which simultaneously liberates us from the compulsive seeking of pleasure and achievement and shows us the beauty of contemplation. In this wondering, almost childlike mindset, the world is anything but boring. All the impressions, ideas, and happenings we see or receive become permanently ours, filtered through our minds or “inwardly digested,” in the words of Thomas Cranmer. In our idle moments, we no longer need to run from ourselves but have stored up provisions for the welcome times of real leisure.

The irony of self-examination, though, is that we may discover that our greatest happiness comes in paying attention to everything that comprises the not-self. This is a curious kind of self-forgetting.

To recall the apprenticeship that Gary recommends: When a person submits to the guidance of another in learning a musical instrument, for example, the activity takes place not just within the student’s mind but in the interaction between teacher, student, and instrument. The relationship is “triangular,” not self-focused. Similarly, when walking in nature, one observes the landscape not with an eye to how it affects one personally, but as an instance of God’s miraculous creation. Of course, it is we who perceive, but we are simultaneously aware of a creator and creation that have nothing directly to do with us. We are filled with wonder that anything exists, and that what does exist is so good. Such experiences offer temporary escape from the insistent demands of the self.

The stubborn characters who appear in C. S. Lewis’s book The Great Divorce illustrate the immense difficulty of such an escape. In this short fantasy, heavenly spirits welcome their visitors from Hell, urging them to forget themselves and embrace the great joy and release that await them in Christ.

Instead, almost to a person, the visitors refuse to relinquish their hard-won identities. The bishop wants to continue his intellectual questioning and paper-giving; the painter insists upon continuing to paint; the mother protests that her love for her son is more important than anything else. All perversely refuse to see the beauty that is right in front of them. If only they could let go of their obsessions with self and work, they would live ­eternally in the beauty of Heaven. God is calling them to be permanently free from triviality, self-obsession, and, of course, boredom.

This permanent freedom isn’t as easy for us, who live in the world and still face the task of self-making. Nevertheless, we can take from Lewis’s story the insight that escaping boredom requires not only a transformation of intellect through liberal education, but also a transformation of will. Perhaps only prayer can really deliver us from our willful pride and self-centeredness, traits that seem to stick with us despite our best efforts.

Gary did not write an explicitly religious book. He does not make the argument that escaping boredom requires conversion. But I think he would agree that a religious assumption lies deep within the notion of leisure itself. Something about leisure is divine, for Aristotle, or “festal,” to use Pieper’s term: It is a celebration of beauty, goodness, and the possibility of eternal life. In understanding leisure this way, we are invited to turn away for a time from our own insistent desires and our own self-imposed projects. We are free to cultivate that wonderful disponibilité to experience, an openness and availability that encourage us to “take interest” in the world and in the lives of others. This kind of affirmation may indeed be countercultural. But it is never, ever, boring.

## (Soho contd.)

“No,” Mascagni answered promptly. “After what happened in the square last night, I reckoned it safer not to have it on me. I got Luigi to plant it down. . .you know where. If the cops knew what it was and were hunting for it, I didn’t want it found on me, if anything went wrong.”

“And what is there that that great brain of yours thinks might go wrong, as far as you are concerned?” the other questioned, open contempt in his voice.

Mascagni ground his teeth in silent rage; it took him all his time to keep that emotion out of his voice. “This,” he answered. “How do I know that I was not spotted when you tried to do McCarthy in this morning? I don’t think I was, but you never can tell with him; he gets to work in some dam’ queer ways when he starts, as we’ve reason for knowing in Soho. But suppose he had seen me and within an hour or two I’d been picked up by the police? Would it have been all right if I’d had that stuff you took off the woman in the square last night?”

“Gott in Himmel!” burst from the other. “Are you a fool altogether to speak like that over the telephone! You know that it would not. Perhaps,” he conceded, though ungraciously, “you were right not to carry it with you. Tell Fasoli that I shall come for the packet to-night at about eleven o’clock.”

“You wanted me to stand by for orders, didn’t you?” Mascagni growled.

“I still do,” came back the sharp answer. “Though as far as that is concerned I can give them to you now. I want you. . .”

“Just a minute,” Mascagni interrupted. “I’ve got a date for to-night—an important date. Can’t somebody else take on this job? I’ve got plenty of good men here that can be trusted. . .”

“Doubtless quite as much as you can be yourself,” came icily from the other. “But I want you to do this work, Mascagni; you, and you alone.” The icy note gave place to an imperative one. “Those are my orders, you understand? Orders! I do not brook any argument concerning them.”

The hot red blood surged up under Mascagni’s olive skin, but he held himself in check.

“Do not forget, my friend,” the voice went on, coldly menacing, “that you are as much involved in what happened last night, as anyone else. You and your men removed the first obstacle in our path, and brought that coffee-stall along when the second obstacle was eliminated. You also it was who took a certain something and also that fool who followed me to the place where it—and he, were found. It was for that reason that I insisted upon you, personally, being in the car this morning when a certain attempt was made to remove yet another. Keep that in your mind, Mascagni, and also something else: that the first moment you make any move, or disobey any order which I conceive to be necessary for the success of my projects there will be another, and an extremely speedy elimination. I leave you to guess who that will be.”

So sinister was the tone in which these words were uttered that whatever urge to open defiance the gang-boss had in him speedily ebbed away, to give place to something remarkably like fear. Utterly merciless as he could be towards those of his kind who incurred his displeasure amongst the denizens of the underworld, he had seen enough of the methods of the man now ordering him about like a dog to instil in him a wholesome terror of bringing his wrath down upon himself, personally. The sight he had witnessed in Soho Square had not been a pretty one; he had no wish for the scene to be repeated, with himself as one of the two principal actors in it.

“Oh, all right, all right,” he snapped quickly. “Let’s have the orders. I can put the date off.”

“I should,” came back to him in amazingly equable tones. “Since I saw you this morning certain information has come to me that this McCarthy is putting forth his very best efforts to clear up the mystery of the Soho Square death. Whether he has any knowledge of the cause of that unfortunate decease—the packet, which we will merely say you know of—I cannot tell. Nor have I any certain knowledge as to whether the identity of that person has been discovered yet. That is a matter of considerable importance to me, and I want you to get out at once, pick up the track of McCarthy and watch his movements closely. It may be that some act of his may reveal what I want to know. Set about that business at once and it may be that you will be able to report something useful to me at eleven o’clock. That is all.”

“But I haven’t the faintest idea where to pick McCarthy up,” Mascagni protested. “He’s like a blasted jumping-jack; here, there, and everywhere.”

“That is your business,” the other informed him coldly. “You will prosecute it to the very utmost of your ability—if you are wise. Until eleven o’clock.”

There was no more. Flo. Mascagni could hear the other hang up his receiver, then the line went dead. Returning to the club room, he picked three of the older men of his gang, tough-looking specimens, who, he knew, could be depended upon to not only use cunning, but could put up a real fight if necessary.

“The rest of you clear out of here sharp at closing time and make yourselves scarce.”

For a moment or two he stood thinking, then slipping upstairs again to the telephone, dialled a certain number. A low, seductive female voice answered his call.

“Who is it?” she asked.

“It’s me—Flo.,” he told her. “I can’t take you out dancing to-night as I promised, Tessa. He’s found me a job to do, dam’ him.”

“He? Who?” she asked, but without exhibiting the disappointment in her voice that he had expected to hear.

“The Big Shot. The one I told you about who’s been finding the big dough lately.”

“The one whose name you don’t know?” she asked.

“I know the name he’s travelling under,” he answered. “But it’s not his real one. The swine is a German. Don’t talk about him, he seems to have ears that reach everywhere!” he added viciously.

“You sound as if you don’t like him, Flo.,” she said.

A wicked laugh came from Mascagni.

“Like him! I like him so much that if I could see a chiv in his throat I’d laugh for a fortnight! But I want his dough, Tessa, and he’s bad medicine to fall out with. But one of these days I’ll show him something that he won’t forget in a hurry.”

“Why?” she asked laconically.

“Why?” he echoed. “Because he thinks he’s everything and the rest don’t matter! Gives his orders as if you were a dog, and his threats at the same time. I suppose I’ve got to stick him while I want him, but one of the best days I’ll ever know will be the one when I’ll either see him dead or with handcuffs on. And one will be about the same as the other.”

A low, musical laugh came to him over the line.

“You love him not, Flo.,” she said.

“I love him not!” Mascagni answered grimly. “And one day he’ll know it. Well, I’ve got to get going. I’ll phone you to-morrow.”

“Leave it till the evening, Flo.,” she said. “I shall be free then.”

“What do you mean by ‘free then’?” he asked jealously. “What are you doing the rest of the day?”

But no answer came to him, and for the second time that evening he heard the receiver hung up on him. He was still muttering curses when he joined the three he had selected for the night’s work and left the Circolo Venezia.

As he passed through the outer bar the wild-looking Signor Paolo Vanadi was holding forth luridly upon some subject or other. Pausing for a moment to throw one contemptuous stare at the quartette as they went through, he jerked a thumb towards them.

“Rats!” he observed, that all might hear. “Rats on two legs instead of four! The only difference is that the four-legged ones have more courage!”

Receiving no answer of any sort of kind to this jibe, he spat deliberately upon the highly-polished shoes of the gangster bringing up the rear, then went on with his impassioned harangue.

*Chapter Xv The Packet Changes Hands*

At five to eleven to the minute, Fasoli cleared his place, then closed and barred the front doors of the Circolo Venezia. His unusual earliness brought savage expostulations from some of his patrons, of which he took no notice whatever. Strangely enough, the one he had expected most trouble with, Paolo Vanadi, he had none at all, for at about the time he commenced picking up the dirty glasses, that gentleman, having drunk himself into an almost lunatic state, simply disappeared.

Having closed, Fasoli did not hang around his bar cleaning up as usual, but got to that upstairs room, and sat waiting by the telephone. At two minutes to eleven it rang. The same cold voice which had addressed Mascagni earlier in the evening came to his ears.

“I shall be there, at the rear door, in precisely three minutes,” it informed him. “Have the packet ready that Mascagni handed over to you for safekeeping to-day. I have no wish to stay there longer than is necessary. Is Mascagni there?”

“No, signor, but I expect-a heem ever-a minute. Eet ees notta eleven yet, signor. Mascagni good-a boy,” he observed, almost timidly. “Somet’ing onexpec’ keep-a heem late. Trust Flo. to carry-a da orders out.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when there came a peculiar, low-noted whistle from the back yard.

“Mascagni ees ’ere now—signor. I ’ear hees wheestl—a.”

Putting back the receiver he hurried to the back door, unlocked it, and opened it cautiously. Mascagni entered alone.

“He ’as just-a rung up,” Fasoli informed him. “Weel be-a ’ere in two, t’ree minutes.”

“The best I wish him is that he’ll break his bloody neck getting here,” Mascagni growled. “He’s after the packet—you’d better have it ready. His Highness doesn’t like being kept waiting—blast him.”

Fasoli glanced at him queerly, and for a second looked as though he was about to make some observation. But evidently he thought better of it and made again for his back door.

“Lock eet after me,” he requested. “And open up when he com’.”

Outside his door he listened while Mascagni shot the bolts. Suddenly, but at some distance away, there rose upon the still night air the sound of a fierce brawl, topped by altercation in a high-pitched hysterical voice. With a certain amount of relief Fasoli recognized the voice—it was that madman, Paolo Vanadi, fallen foul of the police again! Had it not been for the money he spent so liberally during his periodical visits, Fasoli could have wished that he could have remained in their hands for the rest of his existence. The brawl was still at its height as he made his way across a small yard which would have been a veritable deathtrap to any stranger who had endeavoured to negotiate it in this inky blackness, but the wine-shop keeper passed with the utmost certainty through the obstacles towards a ramshackle shed which stood in a corner of the yard. Into this he disappeared, and as he did so the sound of the faraway brawl ended with a suddenness which suggested that the unruly Vanadi had been laid low at last—possibly with a police truncheon.

Scarcely had Fasoli disappeared than a back gate which led into an alley was opened cautiously, and two other persons entered the yard. The one who led the way must have had the eyes of a cat to avoid accident, or else, like Fasoli, was so well acquainted with the place that he could cross it blindfold. A moment later he tapped in a peculiar way upon the door; without hesitation Mascagni unlocked and opened.

The first person to enter would have been promptly recognized by Inspector McCarthy, even by such portion of his face as could be seen, as the man who had supped in Signora Spadoglia’s the night before—the one he had mentally christened, and thought of, as the “man with the ice-blue eyes”. At the present moment those strange-looking members were not so much the colour of ice as of chilled steel. He was garbed in totally different fashion to the night before, wearing rough tweeds and a heavy overcoat of the same material, the collar of which was turned up to his ears. The soft felt hat which topped the lot was snapped down in front to cover those strange eyes, but the moment he entered the room he pushed it back clear of them and fixed Mascagni with a stare so steady that it seemed peculiarly malevolent in its intensity.

But it was the person who accompanied and, by the way, the one who had led the way across the case- and cask-strewn yard, who was certainly the most noticeable of the two at that moment. He was, literally, a dwarf of certainly not more than four feet high, but with the shoulder-spread of a man two feet taller. To add to the queerness, indeed unnaturalness, of his appearance, his head and hands would have been in proper proportion upon a man of the latter height, yet his feet were tiny.

He was dressed in a chauffeur’s uniform of dark grey, and carried a pair of leather gauntlets in his left hand. In features he was as repulsive as even a man of his unusual proportions could be. The whole of his face was heavily pock-marked, while his nose was of that natural order of snub which appears to have no bridge whatever, and just juts from the face in one wide-nostrilled point. His ears were huge and splayed out at right angles to his face, while his mouth, for sheer cruelty, would have done justice to a man-eating shark. The moment he had knocked upon the door and Mascagni had opened it, he dropped back behind the man who was apparently his master, and effaced himself in a corner by the door.

“Well,” the newcomer asked, in that abrupt, harsh voice which seemed natural to him, “have you anything to report?”

Mascagni shook his head sullenly.

“No,” he answered. “I and three of my men have hunted everywhere I could think of to pick up traces of him, but we’ve had no luck. He’s not in Soho to-night, that I’m certain of.”

“He was in the West End at two o’clock to-day,” the other said frowningly. “That I know for positive fact.”

In the same sullen way Mascagni shrugged his shoulders. “He may be still for all I know,” he returned. “All I’ve got to say is that I’ve hunted Soho for him, and can’t find him, nor have I struck anyone who’s seen him to-night. I might have gone on further, only you wanted me here at eleven o’clock, and it takes time to go the rounds.”

There was a certain note of surly defiance in the Soho-Italian’s voice as he spoke; a note which the other was not slow to pick up. The steely light in the pale eyes intensified ever so slightly, though by no other sign did he show annoyance or, for the matter of that, interest.

“Perhaps I am wrong,” he said quietly, and, indeed, amiably, “but you sound somewhat disgruntled, Mascagni?”

The tone in which the words were spoken gave the gangster courage to get something off his chest which had lain dormant there ever since his projected programme with Tessa Domenico had been upset by this man’s peremptory orders.

“If that means that I’m sore, you can take it as right,” he spat, his native viciousness showing for the first time to the man who watched him with that unblinking stare. “It’s all dam’ fine you ordering this and that, and speaking to me as if I were some dog in the gutter. But don’t forget one thing. . .”

“And what is that?” the other interrupted, in a strangely quiet voice.

“That it wasn’t me who killed the woman in Soho Square last night—it’s not me McCarthy’s after.”

“No?”

“No! You can tell me that I had a cut in it as much as you like, and my answer to that is that I knew nothing about it until I saw it done, and if I had known, I wouldn’t have been where I was. You can bet on that.”

“What is the difference, in so far as the law is concerned, between one murder and another?” the man with the icy eyes queried almost pleasantly. “Who killed the owner of the coffee-stall?”

“Not me,” Mascagni snapped quickly. “I wasn’t mug enough for that.”

“I think that if ever you stand in the dock for complicity in either charge, the mere fact that you did not actually commit the murders with your own hands will not stand you in very good stead. You are an accessory, as the English law puts it, both before and after both crimes.”

Mascagni scowled. “When I stand in the dock for it,” he snarled, “you can bet every penny you’ve got that you’ll be there with me. Take that from me.”

“Ach, so? That is the way of it, is it?” The speaker moved with a long gliding stride towards Mascagni, who promptly backed away from him and dropped his hand into his right coat pocket. “Be warned, fool, do not attempt to pull that weapon you have there if you value your own worthless and useless existence. To repeat your own phrase, you can take it from me that you would be a dead man, before you could as much as point it. You will be well advised to remove that hand before—before something extremely unpleasant happens to you.”

One quick look Mascagni took into those unmoving eyes, then slowly his hand came out of the pocket—empty.

“That is better, much better. Now, you listen to me. The first movement that you make in any direction, which I consider inimical to either myself or my plans, will be your last. That you are too big a cur to ever whisper a word that might land you where you should have been long ago, in a felon’s dock, I am perfectly certain. However, here and now I give you fair warning, which is something I do not generally trouble myself to do where rats of your breed are concerned. Make one false step—and you know the consequences.”

A tap, the same peculiar knock as that which had admitted them, came upon the door.

“Open it, Ludwig,” he ordered curtly.

Without a word the dwarf did so, and Fasoli hurried into the room and quickly closed and bolted the door after himself. One quick glance he shot at the two standing there, then took a flat, oilskin-wrapped packet from the inside of his shirt, and handed it over.

“What you wanted, signor,” he said, utter subservience in his voice.

“I wrap eet in-a da piece oilskin,” he said fawningly. “Eet damp—da blue colour she com’ off onna da fingers.”

“Thanks.” Carefully and deliberately the man with the icy eyes unwrapped the oilskin and examined the contents, then as carefully rewrapped it and placed it in his breast-pocket. From a notecase he took two wads of treasury notes, the smaller of which he handed to Fasoli, whose eyes gleamed at the sight of the money.

“I t’ank you, signor; I t’ank you,” the wine-shop keeper almost grovelled, clutching at the notes.

The second packet he flung upon the floor at Mascagni’s feet. “The pay you were promised,” he said coldly. “Let it remind you, Mascagni, of a very important fact: that I keep my promises—pleasant, and unpleasant.” He made an abrupt gesture towards the door. “Get out,” he ordered curtly. “Get out—before I change my mind as to the method of dealing with you.”

Without a word Mascagni picked up the packet of notes, and thrust them in his pocket, then crossed to the door, avoiding the glare in the eyes of the other. Fasoli, scenting the imminence of stark tragedy, opened the door hurriedly, and Mascagni slouched through it without a word. Five minutes later his other guests left, and, it was with a sigh of intense relief that he locked and bolted the door, for the last time he hoped, that night.

“Madonna mia!” he muttered, as the last sound of their departure reached him from the yard. “I do not like that one! I am afraid of heem.”

It was as the pair moved stealthily along in the blackness of the alley at the rear of Fasoli’s that the icy-eyed man spoke again.

“I will drive the car home, Ludwig,” he said quietly. “I think it will be wiser for you to do a little job to-night, and not risk leaving it till later. A job,” he added, “which is one after your own heart. You understand?”

“Ja, Herr Baron,” the dwarf chuckled. “One after my own heart, indeed!”

A moment later, he had disappeared into the impenetrable gloom which was Greek Street in the black-out.

His master kept along towards Oxford Street at a pace which suggested that those strange eyes of his had something of the feline power of seeing in the dark in them. Only once he paused as though he heard some movement not far away from him, stood listening a moment, then went on again.

As he did so someone, moving with the stealth of a creature of the wild, kept a little behind him upon the other side of the road, though certain it was that if his game was shadowing, he could have seen nothing of his quarry. At one corner this unseen second person stopped as though in a quandary, then felt his way into a narrow alley which ran from Greek Street towards the rear of its business premises. A second later he had barely time to flatten himself against the wall when a car shot along the alley without lights of any sort, its mudguards almost brushing against him. It turned into Greek Street, and before the shadower could get to the corner its lights were switched on after it swung again into Oxford Street, running in an easterly direction. But one light was not on—that which should have illumined, even if ever so faintly, the rear number plate.

“Lost him,” the shadower exclaimed ruefully. “I should have been prepared for something of this sort.”

*Chapter Xvi Exit Floriello Mascagni!*

Floriello Mascagni, so summarily dismissed from the Circolo Venezia, landed out into the streets again in a condition of white-hot rage. Not a little of that violent emotion was caused by the fact of the poor showing he knew himself to have made in front of a man he despised, Luigi Fasoli. He, himself, had invariably treated the wine-shop keeper with unconcealed contempt; the contempt of a gang-boss whose mob would have wrecked the place without turning a hair if the older man had dared to show any open resentment. If he knew his Fasoli, the whisper that Flo. Mascagni had taken a verbal trouncing without as much as lifting a finger, would be well around Soho before he was so much older.

His rage was further aggravated by the thought that, but for this German swine’s autocratic orders to meet, and report, to him there at eleven o’clock, he would have been dancing, or otherwise enjoying himself, with Tessa. A moment’s reflection upon this point brought him realization that, when all was said and done, it was but a little after eleven o’clock now—quite time enough for them to enjoy an hour or two at one or two of the underworld dance dives where he and his kind were especially catered for, and where closing hours were an extremely elastic business.

Making for the nearest telephone-booth he dialled her lodgings in Doughty Street—Tessa had months ago left the home circle for brighter surroundings: the simple ways of Giacomo Domenico, the wine-cask maker, and his wife, Lucia, were not hers, these days.

His ring was answered by her landlady, who informed him that Tessa had gone out an hour or so ago, and had evidently gone to some restaurant or night club since she had arrayed herself in her latest finery. She had left no word, either as to where she was going, or as to what time she might be expected to return.

A quick stab of jealousy aggravated still further the savage passions already burning in his breast. Knowing her, it was not feasible that she had dressed in that style to spend what was left of the night by herself. Who, then, had she gone to meet?

He prowled the streets for a while, then decided to put in an hour or two at a certain club frequented by gamblers, which also had the convenient tab “Circolo” tacked on to it for obvious reasons—this particular dive was glorified by the title of the Circolo Romagna, though the Romans who entered its portals were few and far between. He had plenty of money on him, and there was invariably a hot “school” to be found there.

He had been playing for perhaps half an hour and winning steadily, when he asked the club proprietor to give Tessa’s number a ring. The man later on remembered that it was at just on half-past twelve. He got an answer to the effect that Tessa was not home yet; a reply which had the result of rousing the brooding devil which was eating at Mascagni to fever pitch.

Where the hell was she? Who was she out with?

“Dio mio, Flo.!” one of the card-players grunted as for the third time Mascagni raked in a heavy pool. “Like-a dese Engleesa say: you lucky da cards, unlucky da love!”

Mascagni half-rose with a snarl, and in an instant would have been at the throat of the jester, but that he suddenly remembered that the fellow was a Camorrista man, and the come-back from a quarrel with him might be extremely unpleasant. With a muttered oath, he went on playing.

But, strangely enough, from that moment Mascagni’s luck turned. He began to lose even more heavily than he had been winning before.

It was at about one o’clock that the phone rang, and Olinto Delmorti, the proprietor of the club, went to the instrument. It was Tessa Domenico, ringing Flo. Mascagni.

What transpired at the telephone must have been something which pleased the gangster, for, for the first time that night, the brooding scowl left his face and something like a smile took its place. When he came back to the card-table he was whistling.

“Not so unlucky in love, Giacomo,” he observed to the elder man who had spoken. “I got a date in an hour so you’ll know that I’m quitting then.”

“Si!” the other answered. “But you lose-a da cards, now, Floriello. When I spoke, you win ever’t’ing.”

But, by a strange coincidence, Mascagni’s luck changed again. In the next three-quarters of an hour all, and more, of the bundle of notes he had passed over had returned to him, and he got up a good winner. With a careless nod and the remark that they would finish it out another time, he left the club and turned up towards Oxford Street.

In a sort of subconscious way he noticed a little figure in a doorway opposite the Circolo; someone who, as far as height went, might have been a lad of twelve. As Mascagni moved on up the street, so also did he, but the gangster took no further notice of him.

Suddenly rain began to fall in a light drizzle, and Mascagni turned towards a back alley which he knew would give him a short cut towards that part of Oxford Street for which he was heading. He noticed, almost without realizing, that the small figure which had kept pace with him along the other side of the street had disappeared; then he heard him scuttling along the alley well in front of him. One of those pests of homeless kids who are to be found dossing in every second doorway in Soho, he supposed.

Along the alley he went, keeping under the lee side of the wall. Something, a shadow, suddenly moved in the recessed doorway of a warehouse right opposite him. He supposed it was that kid who had dodged in there out of the rain. Then, suddenly, and without the slightest sound or warning, the beam of a powerful torch shot straight into his face from that doorway opposite, momentarily blinding him. He flung his hand up to cover his eyes—and that was the last action of Floriello Mascagni on earth.

With incredible speed and force a knife flew across the dividing space, piercing his throat and pinning his head to the solid door behind him. Like a flash it was followed by the thrower, who plunged a second weapon right to his heart. With a groan, which was the last sound he ever made, he hung there limply for a second or two, then his weight dragged the first knife from the door and he collapsed in a heap immediately beneath it.

With that same swiftness with which he seemed to do everything, the little figure pulled the knife from his victim’s throat and recovered the other. As calmly as though he were eating his dinner, he wiped both weapons upon the dead man’s clothes and put them back in their sheaths. Systematically, he went through every pocket of Mascagni’s clothes and emptied them, then slid out of the alley as noiselessly as he had entered it!

Curiously enough it was that never-to-be-sufficiently-cursed nuisance, Paolo Vanadi, who found the body of the gangster. The mere fact of his being at large proved Fasoli’s positive conviction that his belligerent customer had fallen into the hands of the police, as usual, to be entirely wrong.

One would have thought that, with his police record for bellicosity when in drink, the reveller from the North Country would have made a rush to find the nearest constable to prove that he had no complicity in the crime. Another strange fact, strange considering the condition he had been in but a little over two hours before, Signor Vanadi was now as sober as the proverbial judge and, instead of following what would seem to be the natural course for him to have taken, began to behave in an exceedingly strange manner.

First, in the light of a small torch he concealed beneath his coat, he examined the two dreadful wounds, then himself went through every pocket of the dead man’s clothes, finding, of course, nothing. Then, in the same methodical way, he gave his attention to the door behind the dead man, found that cleft where the first knife had pinned Mascagni to the woodwork, and stood for a few moments in thought.

Giving his attention now to the doorway opposite and the cobbles between, he examined them carefully and apparently came to some decision concerning them. Following the alley along in the direction in which Mascagni had been moving, he found a tiny footprint marked clearly in blood, which showed him that someone, ostensibly a woman, though the foot, although short, was extraordinarily broad for its length, had not only been upon the scene, but must have been extremely close to the body to have stepped in the pool of blood in which it lay.

Still fainter traces of the same foot-spoor showed him that it had proceeded as far as Greek Street and then turned north. An examination of the other end of the alley showed him more than one trace of the way Mascagni had come. Apparently he had seen sufficient to stamp upon his mind some theory as to how the crime had been committed.

But something was still puzzling the signor; there was some little thing which, to judge by the frowning perplexity of his saturnine face, left an unanswered question in his mind—something which did not fit in. Returning to the body he again, and in the same cautious way, turned his torch upon it, and commenced a second search of Mascagni’s clothing; it proved as futile as had the first. Suddenly he lifted one of the murdered man’s hands, the right, and examined the finger-tips closely. Something he saw there brought from him a deeply-uttered, well-satisfied “Ah!”—it was a faint blue stain which marked the whorls of the dead man’s first finger and thumb.

The puzzled expression had gone from the signor’s face, and its place was taken by one of intense eagerness. Leaving the alley he made his way to the nearest telephone box and, in his weird, broken English, informed the police where they would find the murdered body of Floriello Mascagni. After which Signor Paolo Vanadi did something which would have considerably enlightened the denizens of Soho amongst whom he periodically paraded his wild antics.

Moving quietly to Dean Street, and first making very sure that there was no one hanging about in the immediate vicinity, he produced a latchkey and let himself into the lodgings of Detective Inspector McCarthy. Some half-hour later that officer emerged as his well-known self and, keeping well clear of the alley which by now he knew would be a hive of police, made his way by a circuitous route to the Circolo Romagna.

A very few minutes’ earnest conversation with Olinto Delmorti—who had fear of the law in the very highest degree where Inspector McCarthy was concerned—sufficed to give the inspector the information he needed.

Firstly, that Mascagni had come into the Circolo somewhere in the region of a little after half-past eleven o’clock; that he had told Delmorti to put a call through to a certain number—carefully noted down by the inspector—and which was that of Tessa Domenico’s lodgings in Doughty Street, off Holborn. That was at twelve-thirty; an hour later. He had learned that the beautiful Tessa had not returned home at that hour.

Secondly, that at one o’clock the phone rang and, answering it, Delmorti found it to be Tessa Domenico, asking for Mascagni. He was informed that the message must evidently have been an assignation made by Tessa for later that night, or, rather, that morning. Mascagni had been exceedingly cheerful about it and had informed his fellow-gamblers that he was finishing in something under the hour, as he had a date. He had left the club at about a quarter to two with quite a large number of notes in his possession.

“And,” McCarthy thought to himself, “was found not six minutes’ walk away, murdered, and with empty pockets!”

From the Circolo, McCarthy put through a police call to Exchange, and was promptly given the correct address of the number given to Delmorti as Tessa Domenico’s. He quickly gleaned the further information that the subscriber was a Mrs. Flannigan and the house a boarding establishment. So much for that.

“Right,” he said in parting, to the club proprietor. “You can keep the fact to yourself that I’ve been asking a few questions, Delmorti.”

It was as he was leaving the place, followed by the well-nigh grovelling Delmorti, that he observed one man, a dark, swarthy-skinned Italian in the dress-clothes of a waiter, covered by an overcoat, who was seated alone. What quickly fastened the inspector’s attention upon him was that his keen eyes detected more than one spot of blood upon the man’s collar, and also upon his shirt-front. The latter marks had been made still more prominent by a vigorous attempt to rub them out!

Any person carrying bloodstains so close to the vicinity in which Mascagni was lying murdered was of considerable interest; moreover, the man’s face showed signs of having been heartily battered, and not so long since. He had a lump between his neck and jaw which suggested that he might have been kicked by a horse!

“Who’s that chap?” he asked, though without appearing to give the man any particular attention.

Carefully turning his back so that the man in question should have no suspicion that he was speaking about him, Delmorti informed McCarthy that the man’s name was Andrea Praga, a waiter.

“He is not long com’ to Soho,” he informed McCarthy, confidentially. “He is no good—what you call a messee job, Inspectore. To-night ’e is sack forwit’ from the Hotel Splendide, becos’ he juggle wit’ the change of a customer—sapeti?”

“That sort, is he?” McCarthy said. “But that doesn’t explain where he got the pasting from.”

“To-night,” Delmorti informed him, in a still lower tone, “he run across a man called Paolo Vanadi—you know him, p’raps? One tough guy, so to spik. He com’ here from the North each six months or so, and drinks all the wine in Soho.”

“I fancy I have heard of him,” McCarthy said, without move of a muscle.

“Well, to-night,” the signor went on, “Vanadi he is ver’ drunk in de street, and this Praga ’e tries to run da rule over ’im, for his mon’. Plenty mon’ this Vanadi always has on him when ’e com’ to Soho.”

“He’s luckier than I am, Delmorti,” the inspector said. “Well?”

The signor shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, that ees what ’appened to ’im. P’raps it teach ’im to keep ’is ’ands in ’is own pockets.”

McCarthy nodded. “We’ll hope so,” he said, as he turned towards the door. “I must have an eye kept on this Vanadi. We’ve got trouble enough in Soho without his sort bargin’ in. Don’t forget to forget that I’ve been in here making inquiries to-night,” he cautioned. “So long.”

*Chapter Xvii “Big Bill” Does A Spot Of Sleuthing*

The inspector was in an exceedingly thoughtful mood as he made his way back to his Dean Street lodgings. The discovery of that tell-tale stain upon Mascagni’s fingers had opened up a quite unexpected angle in the Soho Square crime. That Mascagni had been connected with it in some way or other had been patent from the fact that he had been in the car which had attempted to run him, or Regan, down that morning. But that the gang-boss had actually had the stolen prints through his hands was the very last thing McCarthy had ever dreamed of. But there was no gainsaying that stain; that told its own story, and that it could possibly have been there through any other medium was unthinkable.

Mulling it over in his mind there seemed only one possible way in which that could have occurred. Mascagni’s mob, probably including Floriello personally, had committed the Anselmi murder and purloined the coffee-stall. When, right after that scream, the body of the butchered Rohner had been tossed into it, the prints had been hurriedly passed to Mascagni, in case anything should go wrong with the killer’s getaway. He would have certain explicit orders concerning them, of course. The probability was that he had returned them only that night—in all likelihood to the mysterious personage whom McCarthy, on the prowl, had picked up leaving Fasoli’s, only to lose him in that car. He would have given a month’s salary to have caught even one glimpse of the face of that individual.

On the other hand there was another possibility to be considered: that Mascagni had still had them in his possession when he was done to death after leaving the Romagna, but, looking at it in every light, the inspector did not think so. But now that that tell-tale stain had made it a certainty that the dead gang-boss had had the prints in his possession, that intriguing business of the knock upon the window by the table at which the Baroness Lena Eberhardt regularly had her déjeuner, took on a totally different perspective. Had his first idea of that rather extraordinary happening been right, and the knock been a definite signal, or message, to the baroness? Looked at in the light of Withers’ report as to her later movements, and particularly her amazing disappearance somewhere in the vicinity of Fasoli’s, it certainly looked so.

That thought brought another to his mind: what had become of Withers who had an assignment with him to be somewhere on the prowl in the vicinity of the Circolo Venezia at about eleven o’clock? Not one sign of him had the inspector seen during his peregrination of the Soho streets, though, he admitted freely, the taxi would have had to have pulled up right under his very nose for him to have been aware of its presence. Still, the black-out was something Withers would have been well hardened to by now, and he would certainly have found McCarthy had he been on the spot as arranged. That he had not been, intrigued the inspector considerably, for as a rule the big taxi-man was the soul of reliability.

Dismissing the thought of Withers’ lapse as of little consequence since he had not needed him, his mind reverted again to Mascagni and the sudden and terrible death which had been dealt out to him. That he well deserved it there was no question of doubt, and particularly so if he had had any hand in the equally brutal slaying of poor old Joe Anselmi, not to mention the butchery in Soho Square; but that was not the point. Murder was murder in the eyes of the law; no matter how much the murdered deserved the fate dealt out to him.

And in that connection there was another thing which puzzled McCarthy considerably—that tiny footprint which, he had no doubt whatever, had been left behind either by the killer or someone connected with him, and present, when the crime was committed. That it was the spoor of a man was impossible, albeit it seemed, despite its size, of an extremely ungainly shape to be left by a woman’s modern shoe. Automatically his mind turned upon the only two women he knew to have been connected with Mascagni within the last twenty-four hours: the Baroness Lena Eberhardt (and behind her name there must be set a very large note of interrogation), and Tessa Domenico. The foot of the former, he remembered perfectly; during that lunch-hour he had had more than one opportunity of noticing, not only the perfect shape of her feet and ankles, but also the highly expensive perfection of the shoes she was wearing. He was as certain as he could be of anything that they had not left that particular spoor.

For one thing the baroness, although perfectly formed, was a woman of rather over average height, and built in proportion; her feet, though leaving nothing whatever open to criticism, were definitely of a long and narrow mould, quite different to the extremely short and thickish print he had found in the alley. And there was another side of that which could not be overlooked: if the Austrian woman were connected with this espionage gang who killed so readily, it would certainly not have been left to her to carry out the murder of Flo. Mascagni.

Just what the feet of the perfectly formed Tessa Domenico were like he could not recall to memory, but she, too, although the perfection of female anatomy, was upon the tall and stately side, and generously built. Her feet, he was certain, were not of the tiny variety which would account for so short a spoor. But there was one thing connected with her which certainly gave him to think, and think hard: that was the fact that, after being away from home at the time that Delmorti had rung up at Mascagni’s request, she, at one o’clock, should put a call through there and make what undoubtedly was an assignation to meet Mascagni at a still later hour—possibly at two o’clock, since he had not left the Circolo till a quarter to that hour. Knowing all the short cuts of Soho backwards, Mascagni would have been able to get to Doughty Street comfortably by two o’clock, even handicapped by the black-out.

And Tessa Domenico, born and bred in Soho and, like most of its youthful denizens, having run its streets night and day for years, knew it as well as did her lover. She would know exactly which short cuts he would take to bring him out at the nearest point to Doughty Street. She would also have a fairly good idea just about what time he would leave the Romagna; he could, quite possibly, have told her that in their talk over the phone.

There came back to him Withers’ words to the effect that Tessa still ran around with Mascagni though more from fear than any love she might have for him; a cynical comment with which he had agreed. Had she, for any ulterior motive arising out of that situation, had anything to do with the “removal” of the jealous lover she went in terror of? Had that phone call been the medium by which Flo. Mascagni had been put “on the spot”?

But there, again, he found himself up against a theory to which he could not give credence. If those footprints were to be taken as of any value at all towards the elucidation of the crime, then Tessa Domenico must have either committed the murder herself or at any rate been present when it had been done; neither of which possibilities—if only from the very method by which the murder had been committed, would, in his opinion, hold water for a single moment. And in the latter case why was there no spoor left by the murderer?

But the fact remained that the call making the assignation with Mascagni had come from Tessa Domenico and within a few minutes of leaving to join her he had been ruthlessly killed. If, again, this espionage gang with which he was undoubtedly connected had had anything to do with his death, then there was a possible argument that she, too, must be in some way connected with them. He could see it was not possible for them to have known, other than by information from herself, that Mascagni was leaving the club at the time he did, to keep an appointment with her. However, whichever way it was, that call would have to be followed up and the beautiful Tessa put through an interrogation which would leave nothing concerning her movements that night in doubt.

With Inspector McCarthy, to make up his mind was usually to act instanter, but he realized that to make for the boarding-house in Doughty Street at that hour of the morning, and, without warrant, or any other authority, pull the girl out of bed for an inquisition would be absolutely useless and, more than likely, defeat his own ends. He decided to turn in and get an hour or two’s sleep.

Six o’clock saw him out of bed again, and dressing; less than an hour after that saw him out upon the street and this time the debonair, perfectly-groomed Inspector McCarthy that the world knew, and, knowing, had taken to its bosom.

He was proceeding along New Oxford Street when a taxi-cab coming along at an entirely illegal pace drew up with a screech of brakes beside him. In the driver’s seat, penitence stamped indelibly upon his huge face, was Mr. William Withers, evidently making his way from his Clerkenwell residence.

“Guv’nor,” he exclaimed, before McCarthy could utter a word, “I know just what you’re a-goin’ t’ say, an’ I ain’t got no answer for it. I done in your job last night; leastwise,” he qualified, “I never done it in intentional—only on account o’ losin’ me temper. When I got back again I couldn’t find you nowhere.”

“No bones broken, Withers,” McCarthy returned equably. “As it turned out I didn’t want you. Where did you get to anyway?”

“Well, it’s this way, sir, an’ I ain’t makin’ no excuses for meself. I was just makin’ for Soho Square to come in by Greek Street, when a bleeder wiv a big car come slashin’ out into Oxford Street wiv no lights on, takes the corner on two wheels and all-but rams me proper. He gave my mudguards a dam’ good rakin’—’ow ’e didn’t take ’em off is more than I know. Take a mike at ’em, guv’nor, an’ you’ll see as ’ow I ain’t tellin’ no lies—th’ dirty arsterbar!”

McCarthy pricked up his ears and took a glance at the mudguards; their condition upon one side amply corroborated Withers’ story.

“What time would this be?” he asked quickly, the recollection of that other car which had shot out into Oxford Street without lights strong in his mind.

“Just about five and twenty past eleven, sir,” “Big Bill” answered promptly. “I’m sure of that becos I knew I was arter your time, havin’ took on a short restarong job.”

“Did you get the number of the car?”

“No, sir. ’Is rear-plate was all daubed up wiv mud or sunninck. Couldn’t’ave been mud though,” he added reflectively, “becos we ’adn’t ’ad no rain till a bit later.”

“If it was the car I have in mind, Withers, it was done purposely,” McCarthy said. “The front one would have probably been the same. It would be easy enough to get away with that in the black-out. Well, what happened?”

“Well, that’s where I lost me temper, sir, an’ done in your job. I shouts to th’ bleeder, an’ he don’t take no more notice of me than if I was a bundle of muck. So rahnd I comes into Soho Square, and out again by way of Sutton Street and the Charin’ Cross Road, and arter ’im. By that time he’s got ’is rear light on, so’s I can ’ang on to ’im.”

“He kept on east?” McCarthy questioned.

“No, sir, that was only a fake. ’E runs along as far as Bloomsbury Street, turns in there to Bedford Square, and cuts through there back into Tottenham Court Road, and then back into Oxford Street agen, running west-bound.”

“In other words he was doubling back on his track?”

“That’s it, sir. ’E goes straight along to Park Lane then cuts into Upper Brook Street.”

“Upper Brook Street!” McCarthy exclaimed. “That leads into Grosvenor Square, Withers.”

“An’ that’s just where he did go to, sir, and wot’s more ’e pulls up at that very ’ouse where that lady as I tailed to-day ’angs out.”

A whistle came involuntarily from McCarthy’s lips. Here, indeed, was something tangible at last.

“What did you do then, Withers?” he asked quickly.

“Nothink, sir. As soon as I see where ’e’d gorn to I pulls up sharp and took a chanst and doused my glims. Not that there’s much of ’em to douse these ’ere black-out nights,” he growled. “But I ’ops out o’ the keb quick and starts fuddlin’ rahnd wiv my ingin in case a cop comes so I’d ’ave some sort of a spiel that it ’ad failed. I reckoned as it was goin’ to be more use to you, my ’anging on to this blighter as long as I could, than goin’ up to the door and ’avin’ a barge with ’im abaht my mudguards.”

“Good work, Withers—great work,” McCarthy applauded unstintingly. “And after that?”

“ ’E was in the ’ouse abaht half an hour, sir, an’ when ’e comes aht, that there skirt as I followed from Verrey’s come to the door with ’im, a-jawin’ away sixteen to the dozen as the sayin’ goes.”

“Did you hear anything of what they were saying, Withers?” the inspector asked eagerly.

Withers shook his head. “No, sir. They was talkin’ in some furrin langwidge—German, I think. The only thing as I ’eard was when he was at the gate he calls out, ‘You’ll see that Heinrich will be all ready to cross with the stuff to-morrow evening’ an’ she sez, ‘Ja,’ and something that sounded like ‘Orf Weedershins’.”

“Auf Wiedersehen,” McCarthy corrected. “And then . . .”

“And then ’e gits into the car agin an’ turns an’ goes back into Park Lane, and drives into the forecourt of that there noo block of flats as they’ve just opened up. ’E ’urries in there, and arter a minit or two a bloke comes out, a servant of some sort, and drives ’is car rahnd into the mews, and puts it away. I’m layin’ nice and quiet over against the ’Ide Park railin’s a-watchin’. I might a took a chanst and put in a question or two, but I thought as it might get back to ’Is Nibs, and mebbe do more ’arm than good. So I started back to Soho in the ’opes of findin’ y’. When I couldn’t, I beat it for ’ome and give you a ring up on the blower, but I couldn’t get no answer. I’m sorry if I’ve mucked anythink up, guv’nor, by not bein’ on time, but I done what I thought was the best thing.”

“My dear Withers,” McCarthy assured him, “a dozen of Scotland Yard’s best men couldn’t have done more. I’ll see that something quite solid comes your way for last night’s work.”

Here, indeed, he was thinking, had the utterly unexpected come to pass through the agency of “Big Bill” Withers’ native Cockney sagacity—plus a bit of sheer blind luck. He admitted the latter part of it freely, but all the luck in the world would not have availed much had it not been that Withers had used the old brain-box to the very fullest degree. Here, then, was a direct connection, an absolute linking up between Fasoli’s dive and the aristocratic Baroness Lena Eberhardt.

When Withers had lost her in that unsavoury vicinity to-day it must have been to the Circolo Venezia that she had made her way. The same disreputable hole which Mascagni had left a little after eleven o’clock to go to the Romagna, from which he had been called to a terrible death by a phone message from Tessa Domenico. The quick ears of the obstreperous Paolo Vanadi had caught enough to tell him that Flo. Mascagni had an appointment with someone at Fasoli’s for eleven o’clock, and at not much later than that hour the shadow he had followed had left that place—to make his way direct to the Baroness Lena Eberhardt’s mansion in Grosvenor Square. With what—if not the prints which he must have recovered either from Mascagni, who at some time or other most certainly had handled them, or someone else in that place?

“You never got a chance to see the man’s face, I suppose, Withers?” he asked. “Either in Grosvenor Square or outside those flats.”

Withers shook his head negatively. “No, guv’nor, I never ’ad a chance at neither place. There was next to no light in the ’all in Grosvenor Square, and the outside of them there flats was as black as the ’obs of ’ell. And atop o’ that, the bloke had ’is overcoat collar turned up to ’is ears, and ’is cady pulled dahn till you couldn’t see nothink of his phisog fr’m any angle.”

“It’s a pity, Withers, but the connection is quite clear enough to make me certain of the man’s identity—that is to say that it’s the same person who I believe to be connected with the murder in Soho Square. And, also,” he added, “with the killing of Floriello Mascagni early this morning.”

“Mascagni!” Withers echoed. “Lumme they ain’t bumped that rat off, ’ave they?”

“He’ll never be deader, that’s a certainty,” McCarthy said. “And now you shall drive me as far as Doughty Street, and I’ll have a few words with the lady who telephoned him to meet her less than an hour before he was found stabbed to death in an alley. Things are beginning to move, William; things are definitely beginning to move.”

*Chapter Xviii Tessa Domenico Moves Upwards*

When opposite the number of Tessa Domenico’s boarding-house, the inspector instructed Withers to drive on a little way and pull up upon the opposite side of the road.

“I want to take a good look-see at the place before I make an entrance there. It’s a queer thing, Withers, how the exterior of a place can tell you a divil of a lot about it and how it’s run, but it certainly can.”

He found it to be one of the large, double-fronted old Georgian houses of which a few are still left in the vicinity, though the greater majority of them have long since been transposed into offices, occupied for the greater part by solicitors. Outside the french windows of the first floor, and which appeared to all belong to one huge room, was one of the ornamental iron-railed balconies so beloved of our great-grandfathers.

Two of these were open, though not over-clean lace curtains prevented him from getting a glimpse into the room. One thing not to be missed was a large printed card hung in one of them which bore the legend “Large, Comfortable, Front Bed-sitting-room To Let.” There, he thought instantly, was his opening to get into the place and have a few quiet words with the landlady before questioning Miss Domenico herself. It was truly amazing how easily garrulous landladies could be pumped, and he wanted to verify the fact that that one o’clock call had been put through from the phone belonging to the house, and also that it had been sent by Tessa, herself. Past experience had made him well aware that very little went on in a boarding-house of that type without the landlady being cognisant of it, whether complacent or not.

He was just about to cross the road when a large and exceedingly expensive-looking car of Italian make drove up and stopped outside the door. From it, to his profound astonishment, there alighted the last one in the world he expected to see—the man with the icy eyes. Promptly McCarthy continued his leisurely stroll along the pavement, taking the precaution to jerk the brim of his own felt hat well down over his eyes; the last thing he wanted was for this man to glance across and recognize him. Fortunately, his quarry kept straight on, mounted the six or seven steps to the front door, and knocked. But before that had happened a lady came quickly from the room opening on to the balcony and waved down to the caller, for whom she had evidently been waiting as she was wearing a hat and was obviously dressed for the street.

In answer to the knock the door opened and first a somewhat slatternly-looking woman appeared at it to whom the man spoke, then turned back again and stood waiting by the door of the car. McCarthy noticed that it was driven by a uniformed chauffeur who was definitely peculiar in appearance. He was equally so in his behaviour, for he made no attempt to move and perform any of the usual offices common to men in his particular line of servitude. He seemed to be perched up in some strange way that the inspector could not quite make out; indeed, was bolstered up like a sort of jack-in-the-box on cushions.

Nor did he attempt to get out and lend a hand when a domestic—as untidy-looking, by the way, as was her mistress—and a man who wore a sleeved waistcoat of a “boots”, appeared and came down the steps bearing a brand-new and extremely expensive-looking trunk. This they proceeded to place upon the baggage rack at the rear of the car, which they left unfastened and hurried back, presumably to fetch another. Considerably to McCarthy’s astonishment, the strange-looking chauffeur still sat rigidly behind his wheel and let them get on with it. When they reappeared with a second trunk of the same size and class, he did not as much as turn his head; evidently an extremely high and mighty person, this.

With the advent of the second trunk the “boots” proceeded to strap the two securely, for which he received an extremely handsome tip from the icy-eyed man, if one might judge by the pleasantly surprised look which came to his somewhat careworn face. McCarthy, eyeing the trunks and having a fairly decent idea of the cost of that quality of goods, found himself thinking that things were evidently on the boom with the fair (or, rather, extremely dark) Tessa.

Then that lady herself came through the door, clad now in a long chinchilla coat which McCarthy would have bet any money had never been purchased under four figures. He had too much experience in the recovery of stolen goods of that class not to be well aware of the prices at which they had been valued. Unquestionably old man Domenico’s little girl had struck heights undreamed of by her hard-working father and mother. She was ushered into the equipage as though she were a queen, the icy-eyed man took his seat beside her, and it started off, running in the direction of Holborn.

Instantly that special sense which gives the born sleuth of men an inkling of the motives of those in whom he is interested, began to work furiously in McCarthy’s mind. Why was Tessa Domenico breaking ground within a few hours of the cold-blooded murder of the man she had given an appointment to so short a while since, and whom it was understood that she was very shortly to marry? If one could judge by the calm serenity of her Madonna-like countenance she was either one of two things: either utterly callous where Mascagni’s death was concerned, or else in complete ignorance of it. And what was at the bottom of the man with the icy eyes coming for her, like some sort of modern Prince Charming after Cinderella, and in a car which certainly cost considerably more than any glass coach which had ever been built?

Those brand-new, luxury-built trunks? How were they to be accounted for in the light of the fact that no later than one o’clock that morning Tessa had phoned her man—as all Soho and Saffron Hill knew him to be—and called him to her side? Now here was Mascagni murdered, and Tessa off with a man of very different status. The two things did not fit; there was a nigger in the wood-pile somewhere, as far as the beautiful Tessa was concerned.

“After them, Withers,” he instructed, upon hurrying back to the cab, “and for the Lord’s sake play canny. I don’t want to arouse the slightest suspicion in the minds of that pair that they are being followed.”

From Holborn the trail held straight on into Oxford Street, and from there to the corner of Park Lane, into which it turned and swung into the forecourt of the newly-erected set of mansion flats to which Withers had trailed the man earlier that morning, and which were certainly as expensive to rent as anything to be found in the West End of London. Their prices, McCarthy happened to know, were enough to make even the ultra-rich blink.

The car drew up outside the main entrance and a huge, imposingly-attired linkman, whose face the inspector recognized instantly as one known to him somewhere or other, and professionally, came out and opened the door of the car for them. Then, as they passed through into the ornate communal hall of the building, the linkman invoked two further uniformed attendants by a shrill of the whistle he carried.

“Blimey, guv’nor,” “Big Bill” exclaimed through the small wicket window. “Take a mike at that big stiff, Jim Delaney, all dossed up like a flamin’ major-general! I’ll swear as ’e wasn’t on duty last night when this bloke drove in. But it’s the same car right enough; you can see the marks on ’is mudguard where he scraped mine.”

McCarthy emitted a low whistle. “That’s right, Withers,” he said, “I’ve been trying to think where I’d known that fellow before. Delaney—I wonder how he picked up this particular job? Another case of forged references, I expect.”

Which suspicion was a perfectly reasonable one as the gentleman had, and not so very long since, been suspected of having been concerned in one or two West End flat burglaries upon premises of which he had been the caretaker. Although he had got clear of the charge in each case only by the skin of his teeth, the police had something considerably stronger than suspicion that the imposing-looking caretaker had actually been the “inside” accomplice in the job.

Prior to this Mr. Delaney had a police-record which included several quite solid “stretches”, and how he had ever got this particular post, except by means of “cooked” references, was decidedly beyond McCarthy. He must have had a “pull” somewhere; it might even have been that someone connected with the premises knew his story and that he had decided to run straight in the future. More power to his elbow if he had. But . . . it was with a very dubious shake of his head that the inspector dismissed Mr. Delaney from his mind for the moment—but only for the moment.

Meantime, from their vantage over against the park railings, they watched the two attendants unstrap the trunks and prepare to lift them down. Upon this occasion, however, the chauffeur decided to superintend matters and got down. To the inspector’s astonishment the man, for all his entirely deceptive width of shoulder and height when seated upon his cushioned perch, was a veritable dwarf, scarcely more than four feet high. As he walked around the car, first stopping a moment to examine, frowningly, the marks upon the two mudguards, he looked as much like a large chimpanzee dressed up in a uniform as anything else.

“Blimey!” ejaculated the gentleman whose car had caused those marks, “there’s a flaming runt for y’! Damme, ’e’s no ’igher than a bantam! That’s right, cock,” he adjured the dwarf, “git an eyeful; you won’t look them dents and scratches off in an ’urry.”

“How the divil does he ever work his clutch and footbrake with those short legs, Withers?” McCarthy asked perplexedly.

“Don’t arst me, sir. ’E must ’ave some sort o’ gadgets rigged up; ’e’d never git at ’em with them stumpy legs of ’is, that’s a cert.”

“Must be something of that sort,” McCarthy agreed. The thought crossed his mind that the dwarf must be an extremely valued personal servant in more ways than one, for no man in his sane senses, without individual knowledge of the person in question, would have ever chosen such a peculiarly built individual to drive a car of that size and quality.

While the thought was in his mind the dwarf hopped back on to his perched-up seat, and the car began to move slowly away from the door.

“It’s a hundred to one that he’s taking it into its garage,” McCarthy said quickly. “After it. Make sure of where it’s parked and get back here as soon as you can. I’m going to have a word with our friend Delaney.”

To say that the ex-suspect was startled at the sudden and totally unexpected appearance of Detective Inspector McCarthy was to considerably understate the emotion visible in the man’s countenance. From a ruddy, entirely healthy colour, his face turned a mixture of grey and a delicate cucumber-green.

“Ah, Delaney!” McCarthy hailed in that soft, emollient voice of his. “Here we are again, y’ see!”

The man cast a fearful glance into the hall where the two porters could be heard handling the luggage into an elevator.

“I—I’ve done nothing, Inspector!” he commenced, when McCarthy cut him off with an airy wave of his hand.

“No one has said ye did, James,” he said quietly. “All that I’m asking for is a little information—official information,” he added significantly. “And the more of it I get from you, of the right kind, the more forgetful I’m likely to be of—of other things.”

In less than two minutes McCarthy had acquired the information that the lady and gentleman who had just arrived were the Count and Countess Hellner—Austrian nobility he understood! That the gentleman had taken the most expensive furnished suite in the mansion for himself and his spouse some three days ago; that his luggage had not as yet arrived.

That the rent of that particular flat—he pointed it out as the one showing six balconied windows on the right hand of the front and overlooking Park Lane and that plaisance itself—was fifteen hundred pounds a year, and that, taking it all round, the mere acquisition of such a flat was a guarantee not only of extreme financial solvency, but also of respectability, as the inquiries made by the manager in both directions were exhaustive.

There were quite a number of other things which McCarthy either wheedled or forced from the big linkman which more than ever strengthened the opinion that, where the beautiful Tessa Domenico was concerned, there was very definitely something more afoot than met the eye.

One last, but most pregnant question he put to the linkman.

“And I suppose, James,” he said, “that if I wanted to pay a little visit to the flat, purely an official visit, ye’ll understand, without the formality of being taken up and announced, or, for the matter of that, anyone knowing about it, it could be managed?”

A rather scared look came into the man’s face.

“Don’t forget it’s Scotland Yard that’s asking, Delaney,” he said quietly. “And we don’t forget little favours.”

“I—I suppose . . .” Mr. Delaney got out nervously.

“Then that’s all right,” McCarthy cut him off cheerfully. “I may look along later—perhaps at a time when ye could make it convenient to be at some duty that takes ye from the front door. Not that that’ll matter!”

At that moment Withers’ cab returned and parked in the place in which it had stood before.

“I’ll be seeing you, James—I’ll be seeing you,” McCarthy murmured pleasantly.

With another wave of his hand he departed and took his seat in the taxi.

“I think,” he said, “we’ll take a quick run back to Doughty Street first. I fancy a word with Tessa Domenico’s landlady is indicated. I beg her pardon—the Countess Something Hellner.”

McCarthy’s one question to that lady was brief and to the point. Did her late lodger, Miss Tessa Domenico, send out a call from the telephone belonging to the house at one o’clock that morning? The landlady’s answer was quite as terse and equally to the point. Miss Domenico had not, and for the very simple reason that since leaving the house at about half-past eleven the night before, she had not returned to it until half-past seven this morning.

“Sich goings on,” she was commencing with a virtuous snort, when McCarthy cut her short.

“I know; I know,” he interrupted with a glance over the dingy hall. “Sich goings on have never been known in your respectable household before. Well, I believe y’, madam, but there are thousands that wouldn’t—including the lads of the ‘E’ Division, Metropolitan Police.”

But, in spite of this jocosity McCarthy left the place in thoughtful, indeed, in an extremely grim mood.

*CHAPTER XIX Mccarthy PARALYSES HIS SUPERIOR OFFICER*

It was somewhere in the region of midday that Sir William Haynes’ phone rang out sharply; lifting the receiver he found that the man who happened to be uppermost in his thoughts at the moment was on the line to him—Detective Inspector McCarthy.

“I say, Mac,” he exclaimed. “They seem to have been going it very hot in Soho last night. Do you know that there’s been a third murder there since midnight?”

“Indeed? Who is it this time?” McCarthy asked in a voice which suggested that the subject was a matter of complete indifference to him.

“You’ll never guess in a hundred years,” the A.C. returned, almost excitedly.

“I’m not trying,” the inspector said calmly. “If it’s Floriello Mascagni you mean, I could have told you that within a quarter of an hour of the time of the murder. And let me correct you upon another point, Bill. Old Joe Anselmi, who I take it is one of the three you mention, was murdered before midnight, not after. Not so very long before, possibly only ten minutes or so, but the first duty of an Assistant Commissioner of Police is to have his facts right.”

“You knew about Mascagni then?” the A.C. asked, somewhat snappily for him.

“Between you and I, Bill—or p’raps it’s you and me, blest if I know—I was the first that knew anything about that particular bump-off; to be precise, I discovered the body and notified the police—when I’d done with it.”

“You discovered . . .”

“I discovered the body and notified the police,” McCarthy repeated. “And it wasn’t any too pretty a sight. Nothing to be compared with the ‘lady’ of Soho Square, of course, but you don’t see that kind of butchery every day—the Lord be thanked.”

“Anything new in that direction, Mac?” Sir William asked avidly.

“Quite a number of things,” McCarthy answered placidly, “though they are not ready to be the subject of a full official report yet awhile. When they are I fancy they’ll make nice juicy reading for the Sunday newspapers.”

“Where are you ringing from now?” the A.C. wanted to know.

“From a telephone-booth not far from Oxford Street,” McCarthy informed him. “I’ve been doing quite a little bit of running round this morning, Bill—long before you were out of your bed, I daresay. By the way, old sawbones turned up with most unusual alacrity at the mortuary after you’d rung him up. You must have used the honeyed tongue on him, Bill; he was as bucked as the divil.”

“Did he get anything useful out of his P.M., that’s the big thing. Anything that is going to help us stop those plans getting out of the country, Mac?” he asked anxiously.

“We’ll do that, all right,” McCarthy assured him. “I want you to lend a hand and without asking any questions, Bill. There’s a certain dirty hole of a wine shop called the Circolo Venezia that I want watched. And when I say watched I don’t mean that I want eight tons of human beef spread out all round it so that no one could mistake either who they are, or what they’re at. I want clever youngsters put on to this game; chaps who don’t look police, or act like them—that clear?”

“Perfectly. You won’t give me any inkling of what’s afoot?”

“I’ll tell you this much, Bill. Those plans passed through that joint of Fasoli’s last night, and in my opinion one man who had something to do with them was Floriello Mascagni. Whether it was through them that he was murdered, I can’t say; but I’m quite certain of one thing, and that was that he was put ‘on the spot’, definitely. There’s another angle of that crime looming up very strongly, and it looks very much to me as though a hunch, a quite unexplainable hunch I had is going to turn up trumps. However, you see to the Fasoli side of it, and if any of the big bugs of the H.O. or the War Office start worryin’ your little guts about those plans tell them that you’ve reason for believing that they’ll be back in official hands before the day is out.”

“That will put me in a most invidious position if they’re not, Mac,” Haynes said worriedly.

“Forget it,” McCarthy responded lightly, “let your mind dwell upon the glory that’ll be yours when you do hand ’em back.”

Without warning he made one of those sudden and disconcerting switches of his.

“By the way, Bill, have you been to the Baroness Lena Eberhardt’s house lately? I should perhaps say how long is it since you paid her a visit?”

“What has that to do with it?” Sir William asked sharply.

“The business of the interrogated is to answer questions as simply and directly as possible, not ask others in return which are merely evasive replies,” McCarthy said whimsically.

“You shoot from one thing to another like a—a. . .”

“Gadfly,” McCarthy supplied. “I repeat the question, Bill, how long since you visited at the Baroness Lena Eberhardt’s house?”

“Although I still don’t see what that has to do with the business in hand, I’ll answer you. I should think it’s a matter of quite a couple of months since I had a cup of afternoon tea there.”

“Look at that, now!” McCarthy said softly. “The A.C. takes afternoon tea with the beautiful baroness in her mansion in Grosvenor Square. And I suppose,” he continued, “that during that, or any other previous calls you might have made, the possibilities are that you might have met some of her friends.”

“Of course I’ve met some of her friends—any amount of them. The baroness is one of the best known and most popular women in society—you’d have a hard job to go anywhere without meeting acquaintances of hers.”

“Ah, evasive again, Bill,” the inspector chided. “I wasn’t speaking about her social acquaintances. I meant her own intimate friends, those to be met at her house.”

“I have met some who might be called her really intimate friends,” the Assistant Commissioner replied, the note of perplexity strong in his voice. “And I’ve met them at her house.”

“Ah!” came softly from McCarthy. “Now we’re getting somewhere. And were any of them Austrian, like herself, Bill? I mean those who were lucky enough to light out prior to Hitler’s precious anschluss, or even after?”

There was a moment’s pause before Sir William answered.

“Some of them were, Mac. Look here, what’s at the bottom of all this questioning?”

“Just give me the answers, Bill, and leave what’s at the bottom of it to me,” the inspector returned smoothly. “Believe me I’m not wasting the breath I’ll be wanting one of these fine days. You’re quite sure,” he proceeded, “that they were Austrian, and not German, by any chance? I reckon to know my Continentals fairly well, but there are times when I’ve a devil of a job to tell the difference.”

The troubled note came into the A.C.’s voice again.

“So far as I can tell you, Mac, they were Austrians, but I may have been mistaken, of course. They certainly were introduced to me as Austrians, mostly of the class we’re speaking of. I’ve no reason for doubting the baroness. Have you?” he shot swiftly.

“Me? The good Lord forbid that I should take any such liberty! What about her servants? Did any of them that you might have run across strike you as being of the true Teuton breed?”

Again there was a pause before Haynes answered.

“N-no,” he answered, on a long-drawn thoughtful note. “I can’t say that any I’ve encountered did.”

“What about Heinrich?” McCarthy questioned. “Do you know which of’em he happens to be?”

“Heinrich; Heinrich,” Haynes repeated. “Yes, I do happen to know that particular one. He’s her butler—a confidential servant who she brought with her from Vienna.”

“Look at that, now,” McCarthy said again, in that soft, enigmatic way he had. “And is there anything about Heinrich which might lead you to think that he was of Teutonic origin?”

“Well,” Haynes answered thoughtfully. “Come to that, Mac, as far as build and general appearance goes he certainly could be German—of the old under-officer type that we got so familiar with in the war. But, of course,” he added hastily, “that doesn’t say that he is German for a moment. I can’t believe that a lady who hates the Nazis and all their works as much as she does would have a German for her major-domo, for that I understood was practically the man’s position there.”

“It doesn’t seem very likely—does it,” McCarthy said emolliently, in fact so much so, that it added considerably to the perplexity of mind of his superior officer.

“Look here, Mac,” he snapped. “Let’s have done with all this. I hate to say it, but as your superior officer I demand to know what’s at the bottom of all this questioning. You’ve something in your mind, and it’s my business to know what it is. What is it that you’re trying to say as far as the Baroness Lena Eberhardt is concerned?”

“Now, now, now,” McCarthy chided. “Temper, Bill, does no good to anyone and, in particular, clouds the judgment of those who sit in high places—like yourself. The question really at the bottom of my mind is when are you likely to take tea with the lady again? Now don’t fly off the handle; just give the question your kind consideration and the questioner a civil answer.”

Across the line McCarthy heard the Assistant Commissioner choke down something. “I have an invitation to look in upon the baroness any time that I’m passing,” he said stiffly, and with obvious effort.

“The invitation extended to you again no later than yesterday perhaps?” McCarthy questioned.

“If it’s any part of your business, that is so,” Haynes answered tartly.

“It’s very much my business, Bill,” the inspector told him. “And what’s more you needn’t go all up stage and high hat about it. If you’ll do what I want you to, you’ll drop in for that same cup of tea quite unannounced this afternoon, keeping in your mind the suggestion I’ve made concerning Heinrich, the lady’s butler, major-domo, or whatever you like to call him.”

That the Assistant Commissioner was paralysed with astonishment by the request was very palpable from the tone in which he answered it.

“You mean that?” he asked incredulously. “This isn’t some. . .”

“This isn’t anything but the proper prosecution of the job you’ve assigned me to,” McCarthy said seriously. “I’ve my own reasons, and very good ones, for wanting someone who has an official eye to run the rule over that particular man, and any others he gets the opportunity of sizing up. There’s no one else at the Yard who can do it, without arousing suspicion, and that at the moment is the last thing I want. It’s up to you, of course. You’re the lad with the say so, not me.”

A certain note in the inspector’s voice told the A.C. that, whatever there might be of what McCarthy called “phlahoolic” in his usual make-up, at the present moment he was absolutely serious.

“All right, Mac,” he said, though reluctantly. “Since you think it’s necessary, I’ll go. Though what the woman will think of my turning up in that way, I’m dam’d if I know. I’ll have to invent some excuse about being in the immediate neighbourhood, and try to make it sound plausible. But I can tell you this,” he concluded grimly, “that if. . .”

“If everything doesn’t turn out one hundred per cent good,” McCarthy cut in, “the good Lord help Patrick Aloysius McCarthy, for nobody else at the Yard will. I’ll chance it. You be there, Bill, and for the love of Mike,” he went on incorrigibly, “don’t forget any of the pretty little parlour tricks your mama taught you at her knee. Be a credit to the Force, and the Force will be a credit to you. And for all you know there may be other distinguished guests drop in to keep you company. You never can tell, as Mr. Bernard Shaw says.”

And before the Assistant Commissioner could find any suitable retort to this persiflage, McCarthy had rung off, leaving Sir William Haynes using language totally unfitted for an ex-officer and gentleman, not to mention one of the high executives of New Scotland Yard.

*Chapter Xx Mccarthy Strikes A Snag*

It was about three o’clock in the afternoon when Withers’ cab pulled up again against the Hyde Park railings opposite that magnificent set of mansion flats. In his little box-office in the hall, ex-convict James Delaney was perusing the pages of an afternoon paper when a shadow fell across him which made him start. He started still more when he discovered the identity of the person who threw that shadow—Detective Inspector McCarthy!

“In?” the inspector questioned, with a jerk of his head upstairs.

“Out,” Delaney answered somewhat nervously. “Not expected back till about four-thirty. First floor, and first door to the right. It’s right next to the lift.”

“I’ll use the stairs,” the inspector said. “Lifts are an idle habit.”

Without another word he turned up a magnificent marble staircase. As he did so, out of the corner of his eye he saw Delaney hurriedly depart along the hallway.

The landing, off which a corridor little less in opulence than the hallway ran, was entirely empty. Not a sign of a living person was there to be seen, either at that level or on the stairs leading upwards. Taking a picklock from his pocket, he deftly inserted it in the keyhole of that door to the right of the elevator, gave a couple of cunning twists, then pushed it open and walked quietly in.

He found himself in an inner, small, but again ornately-furnished hall which led into a large drawing-room. Crossing to the front windows he saw that they looked directly down upon Park Lane. From the balcony outside he could have hailed Withers as easily as from the pavement.

He very quickly decided that this particular room would have no interest for him. It was too newly occupied to contain anything likely to be of use to him. But he looked about it and attended to one or two things which might prove serviceable later. From that he passed into a bedroom very nearly as large, and certainly quite as ornate as the drawing-room itself. Here had been placed those brand-new, expensive trunks which Tessa Domenico had removed from her lodging in Doughty Street that morning. They were still locked, and, apparently, had not been touched since the servitors of the flats had set them down. He would give them some personal attention as soon as he had been right through the flat; experience had told him that it was bad business not to know the lay of the land in any place where trouble might come upon you at any moment.

Out of this commodious sleeping apartment was a completely marbled bathroom which surpassed anything he had ever had the pleasure of taking his ablutions in, even in the most expensive hotels. It was double-doored; the one leading from the bedroom, and another opening into a dressing-room attached, which again opened on to an inner corridor which contained four doors.

Trying the first he came to, he discovered it to be that of another bedroom. Closing the door after him he went on to the next; it too was yet another, and even these palpably extra, or “spare”, rooms were furnished in a state to make an ordinary man stare. No question that if these particular flats were, as they were accredited with being, the most expensive in London, they certainly gave the person who leased them something for their money.

He was about to pass on to the third of the doors when a sound reached his ear which sent him tense and listening intently for all that he was worth. Although two rooms and a corridor separated him from it he was quite certain that he had heard the snap of the outer door lock, if not that of the one which led into that magnificent drawing-room. Retracing his steps quickly to the dressing-room he listened there a moment; it was all he needed to assure him that the occupants of the flat had quite unexpectedly returned, and that he was caught in an anything but enviable position.

Slipping back again into the corridor he searched for a service door of any kind which might afford an exit, but there was none. The dining-room of the flat, from which there probably was a service door, was entered from the drawing-room and lay back from the front. To get at it he would have to pass through the bedroom and drawing-room, the chances of which, without being observed, were absolutely a million to one against. While he was endeavouring to make up his mind as to his best line of action, Tessa Domenico sailed through into the bedroom, followed by her male companion, and rendered those chances absolutely nil.

On tip-toe McCarthy crept to the bathroom door, opened it noiselessly the tiniest bit to see just how the land lay. More than ever were things unpropitious, for while Tessa had thrown off the magnificent chinchilla coat she had been wearing and tossed it upon the bed with her hat, and was evidently about to repair the ravages of her toilet, the man with the icy eyes simply leaned lazily against the door through which McCarthy must necessarily pass to get out. Which, in the inspector’s opinion, put the tin hat on things entirely.

That neither had the faintest suspicion that there was any third party in the flat became evident from the turn their conversation took. The man was as calm and as placid as he had been when he had walked out of Signora Spadoglia’s restaurant the night before, but the tone of Tessa Domenico’s voice proved that she was at least agitated, if some much stronger emotion was not dominating her at the moment.

“Where did you hear that they were hard at work following up his”—her voice trembled for an instant—“his, Mascagni’s death?” she asked.

He took a cigarette from his case and lit it before replying.

“Did you not expect that they would?” he returned with complete casualness. “My dear Tessa, such are the strange ways of this country of yours that the police give just as much attention to the murder of a gangster as they would to that of the Prime Minister. The outcry in the newspapers will of course be less, but otherwise the modus operandi will be exactly the same.”

It struck instantly upon McCarthy, experienced as he was in the different gradations of the English tongue as spoken in cosmopolitan Soho, that this man was unquestionably German although speaking perfect, but pedantic, English. There was nothing colloquial in his phrasing. He reminded McCarthy both in his method of speech and his idiom more of that unconscious humorist, Lord Haw-Haw of Hamburg, than anyone he had ever heard. The only difference lay in a certain sinisterness which was behind this man’s voice which the German broadcaster completely lacked.

“Speaking entirely personally,” he went on, “I think there is little to fear from the outcome of Scotland Yard’s activities. They do not strike me as having anything of either genius or inspiration behind them. For your reassurance I may say that Ludwig has performed the act of, shall we say, elimination too often to leave behind him any trace whatever for them to take hold of. ‘Clue’ is, I believe, the word I should have used.”

McCarthy watching her as she sat before her mirror, saw a shudder of repulsion run through the beautiful Tessa.

“I hate that horrible dwarf!” she exclaimed. “I am afraid of him.”

“Alliterative—and most unfair,” he observed. “You have nothing whatever to fear from Ludwig. As a matter of fact he performed you a signal service in removing what threatened to be a very considerable danger from your path.”

Had McCarthy been one of the animal species he would, to use that well-frayed term, have “pricked up his ears”. So that dwarf chauffeur had been the actual killer of Floriello Mascagni—at the instigation of this cold-blooded German, of course. Had that freak also been the murderer of the Rohner individual? McCarthy doubted it, certain evidences plainly to be seen in the doorway in which the gangster had been murdered, showed that he had been first struck by a well-flung knife. In the Soho Square case the situation must have been entirely different: whoever had killed Rohner had certainly grappled with him, and held him by sheer strength while the ghastly deed was committed. To judge by the physique of the female impersonator that would have been entirely out of the question in the case of the dwarf despite the strength of trunk and arms he undoubtedly was possessed of. Again in the case of Harper, McCarthy was certain that the wound which had given the unusually tall, and powerful, constable his quietus had been delivered direct by hand—the dwarf could scarcely have reached the point below Harper’s shoulder where the death wound had been inflicted. Unless he was entirely mistaken the man who had committed the dual murders in Soho Square was standing but a few feet from him at that moment.

“All the same,” she said nervously, “I wish some other way had been found to get rid of Floriello.”

Again he shrugged those athletic-looking shoulders of his and glanced at her amusedly.

“And what other way could possibly have been so efficacious?” he asked, and his tone suggested that the whole matter was one of the most complete indifference to him. “Do you think that a gangster and blackmailer such as he was could have been bought off—for any length of time? He had threatened your life repeatedly in the event of your having the audacity to look with favourable eyes upon any other but himself. You had no doubt whatever in your mind that he meant those threats, and would most assuredly carry them out.”

“That is true enough,” she admitted. “He would have killed me sooner or later.”

He nodded his agreement. “Exactly; he had all the instincts of a wild beast, without the courage of one. Extermination was the only way to deal with him. He also had had the temerity to threaten me, though in a totally different connection. You, yourself, informed me that he was uttering threats against me no later than last night.”

“I repeated to you just what he said; that he meant it, I have no doubt whatever.”

“Nor I; he was that class of human rat. It so happens,” he continued, “that I am not the man to brook threats of any sort or kind from anyone. I gave him the very fullest opportunity to translate his vicious words into action last night at Fasoli’s. I humbled him into the dirt where he belonged, but there was nothing coming from him.” He gave a short, hard laugh. “That sealed his fate as far as I was concerned. And now,” he said, “let us have an end of it. He was useful for a time and, having outlived that usefulness, has met the only fate possible to the useless of this world.”

He concluded with a gesture which McCarthy read as dismissing the subject of Floriello Mascagni once and for all, then with that slow step of his crossed the room and deposited the butt of his cigarette in a receptacle in the centre of the room. At the same moment the girl got up, lifted her hat from the bed and pulled it on again, eyeing herself in the mirror as she did so. The man, Hellner, Delaney had called him, lifted the chinchilla coat and held it for her. Evidently, McCarthy thought gleefully, the pair were off out again—the well-known Luck of the McCarthy’s was doing its bit splendidly! In that noiseless way of his he backed out through the dressing-room and into that corridor in which were the four bedrooms, closing the doors cautiously behind him.

He did not move again until he heard for the second time that sharp sound of that outer door being closed after them, and even then it was only as far as the bathroom door to make sure that both had departed. For some minutes he stood listening intently, but not the slightest sound came to him. He might have chanced creeping as far as the drawing-room windows and taking a peep down but for the fact that the curtains of the ornate apartment were drawn, and a quick glance upwards on the part of either Hellner or the girl might upset his apple-cart completely. He determined first to continue his examination of those bedrooms; in one or other of them must be the man’s luggage, since he had seen no sign whatever of it in the rooms he had already been through. Delaney had said something about it, but just what, had slipped his memory. He questioned much if Tessa’s new belongings would hold anything to interest him.

One by one he completed his examination of the rooms, to find nothing of what he sought. Evidently Hellner’s personal belongings had not yet arrived.

He was turning back into the corridor again when he caught sight of some inset panelling which might be quite easily the well-camouflaged entrance to a box-room. He was stooping to examine it when without the slightest warning that meticulously spoken voice he had been listening to but a little while before invited him to lift his hands, and quickly; at the same moment what was only too palpably the muzzle of a revolver or automatic pistol was jammed hard into the small of his back. The menace behind the quiet tone was all-sufficient to tell McCarthy that the quicker that request was obeyed the better.

But, almost involuntarily, McCarthy had swung round, to find the weapon speedily transferred to the pit of his stomach and himself staring into the utterly unmoving, though now narrowed ice-blue eyes. He now saw that that which had prodded him in the back was an automatic pistol, complete with its silencer, of a calibre to make short work of anyone it was discharged into. For just one split-second there flashed through the inspector’s brain the thought that he would take a chance and attack, but the eyes so contemptuously regarding him were no longer blank and expressionless; there was that in their pale hardness which told McCarthy that this man would kill without the slightest compunction. The one hope he had was to play for a bit of time and seize upon whatever chance the other might give him—which was not likely to be much.

“Things,” he remarked pleasantly, and with his unquenchable smile, “seem to have come slightly unstuck.”

“Very much so, as far as you are concerned,” the other retorted in an equally equable tone.

“Perhaps,” McCarthy bluffed. “I think I have the pleasure of speaking to Mr.—or is it Baron?—Hellner?”

“That name will do as well as any other. To simplify matters we will agree upon Hellner—Baron Hellner. And you, I understand, are Detective Inspector McCarthy, of Scotland Yard.”

“New Scotland Yard,” McCarthy corrected in the same affable way. “Though it’s a common error among foreigners.”

The other gave him a cold smile—too chill and wintry to be propitious, the inspector thought.

“May I ask what you are doing here?” Hellner questioned.

“Now I should have thought that that would have been instantly apparent to a gentleman of your intelligence,” McCarthy countered brightly. “Still if you want it in so many words I was endeavouring to search the place, under the mistaken idea that yourself and the Signorina Domenico had gone out again.”

“We should have done so but for the blindest piece of chance,” Hellner informed him, in that pedantic English of his. “Fortunately for me, and definitely unfortunately for you, in assisting the ‘signorina’, as you call her, on with her coat, I chanced to glance into her mirror at a certain angle. That angle gave me a perfect view of yourself, concealed behind, and peeping out from the bathroom door. I could have shot you down there and then, McCarthy,” he went on grimly, “and, under other circumstances would most assuredly have done so. But as the lady happens to be already in a highly nervous condition, I had no wish to startle her into some hysterical action which might not have suited my purpose. One has to think of these things.”

*Chapter Xxi The Tables Are Turned*

McCarthy nodded. “I see your point,” he said gravely. “It’s a thousand to one she’d have screamed like the divil and probably brought people on to the scene that ye’d not be wanting here—not at the moment. And after all,” he proceeded as though arguing some point of interest quite detachedly, “it’s only to be expected that a woman of that type would be in a high state of nerves when she knows that, not only is she connected with a wholesale murderer, but has been part and parcel, not to say an accessory before and after, the fact of one particular killing last night, which the police have already well in hand. Indeed, as the officer in charge of the case, I don’t think there is a great deal of doubt that the gentle Tessa sent the telephone message that put Mascagni on the spot for that dirty little dwarf of yours to kill. Ludwig, d’ye call him?”

The pale eyes, watched so closely by McCarthy, seemed to become even fainter in colour if that were possible, and most certainly the look of menace in them deepened. But the man had evidently tight hold upon himself and never for one second did he betray anger or even exasperation.

“I think Inspector McCarthy can scarcely claim credit for information gained by listening-in to a private conversation?” he remarked.

“Not at all; not at all,” the inspector hastened to agree. “But it was mighty helpful and is going to save a lot of time, and money. It’ll be a matter of a very few hours before Herr Ludwig will find himself behind bars, on his way to the gallows via the Old Bailey.”

“That is as maybe,” Hellner said acidly. “To quote your English saying, a lot of water will run under the bridges between this and then.”

“Don’t you believe it, Herr Baron,” McCarthy said heartily. “We don’t make many mistakes about murderers in this country, once we know that they are. And social status makes no difference. We’ll hang you just as quickly for the murder of the spy who called himself ‘Madame Rohner’, and also for the wicked killing of Constable Harper at the back gate, as we will that mis-shapen chauffeur of yours.”

“Is that so?” the German asked quietly, and McCarthy glancing down noticed that his finger tensed upon the trigger.

“That is so,” he answered promptly. “Now that is a little bit of work I rather pride myself on,” he continued, “particularly when you consider the time I’ve had on the job. My first impression that you were the murderer was what I’d call a pure ‘hunch’. That’s an American word, by the way; I don’t know whether you’ve anything in German to exactly correspond with it. It merely means a sort of instinct. It was owing to that ‘hunch’ that I followed you out of Soho Square, and later set a certain friend of mine to follow you up. And it was there, Herr Baron, that you made your first big mistake—if you don’t mind my pointing it out.”

“Certainly not. One lives and learns.”

“I somehow have the feeling that you’ll not be doing either for long,” McCarthy informed him, with a shake of his head. “Your first mistake was in not leaving Danny Regan just where your friends—men of Flo. Mascagni’s gang, by the way—laid him out. It wouldn’t have altered things actually, but it would have taken a little more time before I, personally, could have connected up the woman found dead on Hampstead Heath with the person killed in Soho Square. And equally,” he went on significantly, “before I connected the pseudo Madame Rohner with the person who had stolen plans of certain anti-aircraft dispositions from Whitehall that afternoon.”

That that was a totally unexpected shaft, and one which struck home, was very palpable to the inspector. For just an instant the pale eyes seemed to glaze and again that trigger finger tautened. But the man kept complete command of his voice when he put his next question.

“And how did that miracle of efficiency come to pass?”

“Perfume,” McCarthy answered laconically. “A certain odour was unmistakable in the room at Whitehall from which the plans were stolen. It hung heavily upon the air at the scene of the Rohner killing—where, by the way, you left a stiletto and a lace handkerchief behind you. That same scent was present unmistakably when the body was brought in to the mortuary by the Golders Green men. Not only that but there was a certain stain upon the underclothes of the—er—‘lady’ which told me that she had most certainly handled and, indeed, carried the stolen prints about on her—him, I should say, of course. The inference was obvious—that the murder had been committed to get them.”

“I see that I have been underrating your intelligence, Inspector,” Hellner said quietly. “Go on.”

“When, still later, I found those same stains upon the finger-tips of the murdered Mascagni, it wasn’t difficult to put that two and two together and make four of them. I already knew that Mascagni was mixed up in the business, from the mere fact that he was one of the gentry in the car that tried to put paid to myself and Danny Regan as we were coming back from the mortuary. You must have had a very good suspicion even then, Baron, that you were extremely prominent in my mind in connection with the murder.”

“For some reason not altogether explainable even to myself, I had,” Hellner answered, those unmoving eyes of his still fixed upon the soft and extremely deceptive ones of the inspector. “Please go on; this is most interesting.”

“You had another stroke of bad luck,” McCarthy proceeded. “After you left Fasoli’s last night, you very nearly crashed a taxi of a highly-esteemed friend of mine who, as a matter of fact, was turning into Soho to pick me up. As, apparently, you treated his protest with that contempt you seem to have for less fortunate persons of a humbler state than yourself, he turned and followed you, Baron.”

“Followed me!”

“Followed you,” McCarthy repeated. “As far as Grosvenor Square, and then again to this place.”

“I saw nothing of him,” the Baron snapped.

“He took remarkably good care of that,” McCarthy informed him pleasantly. “As it happens he’s by way of being an exceedingly shrewd chap who assists me no little from time to time, and he realized that he’d discovered the one join-up I’d been waiting for ever since a certain lady friend of yours had paid a call at Fasoli’s in the afternoon.”

“Ach, Himmel!” burst involuntarily from the German.

That change McCarthy had been waiting for came suddenly into the expression of those eyes. The revelation that he had been followed to Grosvenor Square and watched there, with the obvious implication that the visit connected him definitely with the Baroness Lena Eberhardt, had, unquestionably, been a shattering blow, both to his vanity and to his sense of security.

“Women,” McCarthy said softly, “are the very divil in espionage, or any other kind of plotting for the matter of that. The dear things simply can’t keep their teeth shut. Clever as they think they are, and cunning without a doubt, they almost invariably give the one lead away which sooner or later wrecks themselves and everyone concerned with them. My little friend, Tessa Domenico, will do just the same when they take her into the Yard for interrogation. I expect she will have been picked up by now. She’ll squeal all she knows—you see if I’m not right, Hellner. And Fasoli—there’s a poor kind of reed to lean upon when the going gets tough. The little birds warbling in the trees in Lincoln’s Inn Fields can’t get their notes out half as fast as Luigi Fasoli will spill all he knows.”

A low, animal-like growl came from the throat of the German.

“Curse you,” he began in little more than a hissed whisper. “Whatever happens, you, at least, will not be there to see it!”

“Get that idea out of your head entirely,” McCarthy snapped, tensing himself. “I’ll be there, right enough, and I’ll give you one last piece of information, combined with prophecy, for luck. Heinrich will not take that stolen stuff out of England to-night!”

Like lightning one of his hands flashed downwards and outwards, cutting the pistol away from his mid-section; instantly it exploded and he heard the heavy bullet tear its way into the frame of the door. Simultaneously his right hand whizzed up into the man’s face with terrific force, laying it open to the bone. The blood streamed from the wound, for a second blinding Hellner and giving McCarthy just that fraction of time he needed to get a grip upon the wrist of the German’s gun hand.

But he was to find that in this man he had an opponent that it took more than one blow, terrible as it was, to stop. Hellner’s left fist crashed solidly into McCarthy’s face, driving his head back against the door with almost stunning force. A moment later a knee in the groin gave him agonizing pain, but it also did something else upon which the other had certainly never counted.

It set the fighting Irish blood of the inspector ablaze with fury! Still gripping the man’s gun-wrist, he lashed away at the bloodstained face with a viciousness which no man could have withstood for long. Hellner, as tall as McCarthy and every whit as powerful, dashed an iron-hard head into his face with shattering force—to be met the second time he tried it with an uppercut which nearly tore it from his shoulders. By sheer strength, McCarthy rushed his opponent back out of the door-way across the passage and up against the wall.

With the German trying to get a grip upon his throat, McCarthy dug him under the heart with that iron hand of his until the man’s breathing became a short hard gasp which told its own story. But, although hurt, he was as deadly as a rattle-snake every second of the time.

But the blood he was losing was weakening him. It was pouring from his face in a torrent now, covering his own clothes, and McCarthy’s, with the sticky fluid. In vain he tried to get a leg-lock and throw the Scotland Yard man, but only towards his own undoing, for McCarthy, expert at ju-jitsu as he was, nearly tore the limb from its socket.

Desperately he struggled to get the gun-hand free, but the inspector, realizing that if that happened his last moment had come, held on with the tenacity of a bull-dog. Again and again he lashed those wicked blows under the heart, but if they were slowing the man, he certainly was showing no sign of it beyond his gasping breath.

Then, with a sudden quick twist of his whole body, but still keeping his grip upon the wrist, McCarthy stooped quickly, whipped the man bodily to his shoulder, and sent him flying out, full length upon the floor. With the wrist held, the arm joint was wrenched completely out of its socket and the gun fell from limp, nerveless fingers.

But even then the other was not yet finished. One bloody hand shot out and gripped McCarthy by the ankle, and he endeavoured to pull the detective down upon the floor with him. And then it was that the Scotland Yard man got the hold he wanted.

Again stooping quickly, he got the cross-hold scissors grip upon the man’s collar, drove his thumbs up under his ears, and pressed firmly. With a gasping sigh Hellner went limp all over, out to the wide, wide world!

Through every one of the German’s pockets McCarthy went, searching him right down to his skin, but not a sign of the stolen dispositions could he find. Hellner must have passed them over to the Baroness Eberhardt during his hasty visit last night. At any rate that was the conclusion McCarthy came to, and devoutly hoped was the right one, since he was not carrying them upon him.

Pulling the unconscious man’s hands behind him McCarthy started to look about him for something with which to secure him beyond any possible chance of freeing himself again. He found it in a strong silken coverlet which he ripped down and twisted into rope. Securely lashing Hellner’s wrists together behind him, he then bound his ankles so that it was impossible to move an inch even if he managed to get up onto his feet. To make sure of that he lifted him, tossed him bodily upon one of the beds, ripped up a coverlet from another room and fastened him securely to it; in his unconscious state he did not dare to gag him in case the man choked to death. He was quite certain that with all the doors closed no one would ever hear him if he yelled his head off—these particular flats were not put up with breeze walls.

Hurrying through to the drawing-room he dialled the Yard and got through to Haynes just as that gentleman was leaving, presumably to keep his afternoon assignment.

“Bill,” he said quickly, “put out a drag for Tessa Domenico right away. She’s in the West End somewhere, probably shopping. Whatever happens she must not be allowed to get back here.”

“Where’s here?” Haynes asked pertinently.

Giving him the address, he further instructed that two men had better be put on assignment at the front entrance, in case the drag missed her.

“Now give orders to raid Fasoli’s and pick Luigi up without further loss of time. Also every man known to belong to Mascagni’s gang. Hold them for interrogation until I can get to the Yard.”

“Have you got those stolen papers yet?” the A.C. questioned avidly.

“I shall have by evening, Bill,” McCarthy informed him. “Don’t let the thought of them trouble your mind. You keep that afternoon tea appointment.”

“Are you still set on that crazy idea, Mac?” Haynes asked troubledly.

“More than ever,” the inspector told him flatly. “Don’t you let me down on that, whatever you do.”

Ringing off before the Assistant Commissioner could raise any further objections, McCarthy hurried downstairs, pausing only for a moment at Delaney’s box.

“I’m keeping the key of that flat for a little while,” he informed that worthy who stared at his dishevelled and blood-stained condition in astonishment. “No one’s to go near it. If they do you’ll have trouble.”

Out to Withers’ taxi he hurried and to say that the burly William’s astonishment at his plight was great is to considerably under-state his feelings.

“Blimey!” he ejaculated. “You ain’t ’alf struck it rich, guv’nor. ’Ow many of ’em set abaht you?”

“Only one,” McCarthy informed him, endeavouring to smile through a pair of split lips, “but he was plenty. Run me back to Dean Street to clean up and change my clothes.”

“That suit’s kind of bitched up proper, ain’t it?” Withers observed commiseratingly.

“ ‘Bitched’ is no word for it,” McCarthy said with a mournful shake of his head. “Savile Row stuff, Withers—and not yet paid for!”

*Chapter Xxii A Two-Handed Raid!*

It was exactly five o’clock when the inspector, still in “Big Bill’s” taxi, arrived at Grosvenor Square—that hour when all those who have the time, or the inclination, generally partake of that cup which, we are told, cheers, but does not inebriate.

Although he had given himself very considerable attention after changing his ruined garments in Dean Street, there was still no shortage of marks upon his features, left there by the fists of the German secret-service agent. The well-nigh ruined Savile Row suit had been replaced by a different one entirely; one which any working man might have worn about his job.

The thing which was exercising McCarthy’s mind most at the moment was the tricky job of getting into the Baroness Eberhardt’s house without any of its occupants being any the wiser. To have gone up to the front door and demanded admission would have perhaps given that lady the very little time necessary to get that packet out of her hands, and even the house; after which the picking it up again would be the divil’s own job, if ever it was accomplished at all.

As matters stood, with everything ready to smuggle those all-important plans out of the country that night, it was more than likely that not only the lady herself, but such of her household as were engaged upon this work of espionage would be well upon the qui vive, suspicious and on the look-out for anything that might be inimical to their plans. With the murders which had been committed in the process of acquiring the dispositions, they might well be on the watch for anything, or anyone, who might throw a monkey-wrench into their scheme, even at the last moment.

He had left Withers with the car around a corner of the square out of sight of the house, and was taking a quiet look over its exterior when his eyes fell upon the figure of Sir William Haynes approaching rapidly from the direction of Park Lane, and certainly the Assistant Commissioner had turned out in full regalia for the job. His morning coat was the very last word in fashion, his trousers were creased to a razor-like edge, while his shoes and top hat positively glittered. McCarthy promptly turned his back upon this spectacle of sartorial splendour—he had not the slightest wish for the A.C. to recognize him at that state of the game—but even before he did so, he saw that the face of his friend was wearing an anything but happy look. The A.C. was finding no particular pleasure in this portion of the business.

A second glance back showed him Sir William upon the top step outside the massive front entrance, and waiting, card in hand, to be admitted. The same glance also showed him that two heavy motor lorries which had come into the square had pulled up before a manhole in the pavement and which obviously belonged to the house; apparently the lady’s winter supply of coal was about to be shot from them. Which gave the nimble-witted McCarthy an idea.

Hurrying back to the taxi he beckoned Withers out.

“Go and get hold of the boss of that gang of coalies and bring him here,” he instructed. “The sight of them has shown me just how we’re going to get into that house and be right on top of the people I want before they can get the slightest chance to slip what I’m after out of the way.”

“Are we a-goin’ to raid that there place, guv’nor? Jes’ you an’ me?

“That’s the idea as I see it at present, Withers,” the inspector informed him. “With the aid of those worthy gentlemen we’ll be on their necks almost before they know we’ve landed. And I don’t doubt,” he added, “that we’ll get quite a bit of pleasurable excitement out of it.”

Mr. Withers took one look at a suspicious-looking bulge under the left-hand side of the inspector’s coat; a bulge which mutely intimated to him that McCarthy was carrying an automatic pistol, or revolver of fairly heavy calibre. Without a word he reopened the door by the driver’s seat, stooped and dipped his hand down into his toolbox and took from it a weighty eighteen-inch spanner which he dropped into the pocket of his driving coat. It might not be needed, but with the inspector on this sort of a job you never knew what was going to happen next!

The burly person in charge of the coal gang having been brought before him by Withers, the inspector first showed him his warrant card, and then requested his aid—for a consideration. The gentleman in question promptly announced that he was only too proud and happy to be of service. Moreover, if the inspector thought there was likely to be a bit of a rough and tumble on hand, he and his mates would be only too happy to join in.

“The thing I most want to know,” McCarthy said, after suitably thanking him for this sporting offer, “is what is your usual method in this business.”

He was promptly enlightened as to the rites governing this procedure. When the cargo of the two motor-lorries, each carrying five tons of coal in sacks, had been shot down the manhole, two of his men went down the area steps to the basement and were admitted to the coal cellar. There they shovelled it off all nice and level for the servants of the house to get at. That had been the regular routine for the last three years, after which they were presented with a bottle of beer each and a tip, and then departed.

“Very well, then,” McCarthy said. “When it comes to this going downstairs business, I and my friend, here, will make the descent and do the shovelling in the place of your men. So that by no chance any suspicion can possibly be aroused, two of your squad can slip around and sit in the taxi here until we get back, or at any rate keep out of sight until such time as it’s propitious for them to reappear.”

But Coalie Number One shook his head dubiously at this suggestion.

“It wouldn’t work, guv’nor,” he said, “because it’s a tricky game an’ somebody’s got to know ’ow t’ set abaht it. We’re watched all the time by that there bulldoggin’ butler, name of Heinrich, or some such, ’oo looks t’ me like as if ’e’s been one o’ them there sergeants in the Jerry army we used to run up again in the war. ’E foxes y’ all the time as if you was goin’ t’ pinch somethink. I’ll go dahn wiv yer, then ’e can’t think as there’s nothink wrong, because ’e knows me well, though ’e ain’t none the more pleasant for that. Arf a mo’!”

He slipped round the corner to the motor-trucks and presently reappeared with two of his men who promptly divested themselves of their leather aprons, sleeved waistcoats and headgear, and handed them over to Withers and McCarthy.

“Nah, you two stick ’ere in this keb,” the foreman ordered, “and don’t git aht of it till you’re told. Unless,” he added, “you ’ear a proper bull an’ a cow goin’ on, then come dahn and do sunnink useful towards it.”

Assured fervently upon this point, McCarthy and the monumental Withers followed their leader to the lorries. When the time arrived, he led the way down the area steps to a small but extremely solid door upon which he knocked; McCarthy noted that three heavy bolts were drawn before it was opened. Evidently the house of the Baroness Eberhardt was one which invited no intruders below stairs.

McCarthy decided that the coalie had not been far out in his appraisement of the tremendously thick-set and lowering-faced man who opened the door to them. If he had not been a German non-commissioned officer of the old, vicious type, then he, McCarthy, was a very mistaken man. He gave them no “Good day” or anything else civil, but merely pointed along a dark and dungeon-like passage towards one of three doors which stood in a row. Two, the inspector saw, were heavily barred and padlocked upon the outside. The one pointed to was open and was evidently the huge cellar which could take ten tons of coal at a time.

Straight for it their leader went and, with a gruff: “Nah, then, set abaht it!” led the way into the most gloomy-looking cavern McCarthy remembered to have ever seen in his life. It was lit only by the ray of daylight from the manhole in the pavement. At the word of command they crashed realistically into the enormous bank of coal, which was still being further enlarged by the men on top. Hovering about the door the whole of the time was this butler, Heinrich, who looked as much like a bulldog about to spring as anything else.

“ ’Ow abaht it if ’e don’t make a shift, guv’nor?” “Big Bill” muttered through shut teeth.

“Then he’ll have to be shifted!” McCarthy answered in the same way.

But five minutes passed and there was still no sign of the welcome happening, and McCarthy had just made up his mind to act for himself in the matter when from above a bell rang peremptorily, three times. Muttering to himself in German, though in too low a tone for the inspector to pick up his words, the man, after another keen glance at the three of them, moved towards the bottom of a stone staircase some twenty feet further along the passage.

It was difficult to hear the man’s footsteps on the stairs above the noise of the rasping of the shovels and the sliding of the coal, but McCarthy gave him what he considered time enough to reach the first landing and get out of sight, then quickly slipped into the passage. The attempt would have to be made now.

It was only reasonable to believe that the baroness herself would be engaged with Haynes, and possibly other guests, though he doubted much that with what was afoot in her household upon this particular day she would have invited any callers. Whispering to the coalie that he was about to make the effort he had spoken of, and calling to Withers to follow him, he crept cautiously for the bottom of the staircase.

He had scarcely started when they heard the sound of the man returning, his feet making a clear ring upon the stone steps as he descended. Something had aroused his suspicion, though what McCarthy could not for the life of him think. Then it suddenly occurred to him that the perfectly clean faces of Withers and himself, entirely free from coal-dust or any other earmarks of their supposed occupation, must in itself have been suspicious to a man of this type.

The features of their friend shovelling away in the cellar were as black as the medium he worked with; so also were those of the men upstairs shooting the stuff down, while those of Withers, although at no time to be taken as a specimen of a well-groomed man, were as white as the driven snow in comparison. As for his own face, he was perfectly well aware that after his recent ablutions and despite the bruises he exhibited, it must fairly shine like that of a well-scrubbed infant. It had been a damned foolish oversight, and was no doubt the cause of this suspicious-natured man determining not to leave them for a moment. Well, it was too late to do anything about it now, and upstairs they had to get by hook or crook.

The instant the man set foot in the passage again his hard little eyes fell upon McCarthy crouching there, a good five yards or more from the cellar in which he should have been at work.

“Ach! Himmel!” he snarled, and turned with the obvious intention of shouting a warning to someone he must have known to have been within hearing up the stairs. That was as far as he got!

Like a tiger McCarthy flung himself at him and any sound that might have come from his mouth was stopped by a crashing smash which split it to the gums. It was followed by a second which landed upon the man’s jaw and sent his head back with a jerk. The blow was one which would have dropped most men, but this bull-like creature shook it off and put his hand to his mouth to shout to those upstairs. Then, and before McCarthy could make another move to stop the dread sound, something cracked down upon the man’s skull which dropped him like a stone. It was Withers’ spanner.

“Beg parding, sir,” that worthy said, “but I knows you ain’t got time to waste on the likes of ’im, and if ’e’d a-started ’ollerin’, nobody knows ’oo ’e’s a-goin’ t’ bring down. Wot do we do wiv ’im?”

“Put him into one of these cellars,” McCarthy whispered. “They’ll hear nothing from him here.”

An order no sooner given than carried out.

Instantly the inspector crept to the bottom of the stairs, listened for a second, then began to make his way up them. He was nearly to the top when he discovered that Withers was on his heels.

“I don’t know about you, Withers,” he whispered dubiously. “I can’t tell how strong the gang here is, and I don’t know that I’ve any right to risk you stopping a bullet or something equally pretty. After all you’re a civilian.”

“You can call me a bleedin’ copper for the time being,” Mr. Withers gave back. “A sort of a ‘special’ like.”

“Somewhere on this landing we’re going to run into a nest of servants,” the inspector continued. “A house of this size is bound to be pretty well staffed, and you can bet on all of them, men and women alike, belonging to the same breed. Once they realize what we are they’ll turn nasty.”

“So much the worse f’r them,” “Big Bill” said stolidly. “What’s the move, guv’nor?”

McCarthy pointed ahead to a door on the landing, from behind which they could hear the murmur of voices.

“That I fancy will be the kitchen,” he whispered. “And with Heinrich out of the way, if we can only manage to fasten them up there, we’ll have a clear field ahead of us upstairs.”

Withers nodded towards the key plainly to be seen in the lock.

“What’s the matter with turning that on ’em, and there they are, so t’ speak.”

McCarthy shook his head. “It’s a bit too easy to be true, Withers,” he returned. “We don’t know what other doors there may be leading out of that room that they can escape by, and perhaps land us in a trap. We’ve got to get in first, and make sure of that.”

From his shoulder-holster he drew his automatic pistol, then from his coat pocket took its silencer, and jammed it down tight on the barrel.

“We want no noise to give any warning above,” he explained. “The quicker and quieter this job is done, the better.”

Without hesitation he walked to the door, opened it, and passed through, followed by Withers, his spanner ready for any emergencies. That luck was with them to the extent that the majority, at least, of the servants of the house seemed to be congregated there was very apparent, and equally so the fact that they were completely taken by surprise at this most unexpected arrival.

The principal one seemed to be an enormously fat chef, garbed in the recognized uniform of his profession, and whose face went deadly pale as his eyes fell upon the weapon which McCarthy waved in an arc which covered the whole of the gathering.

At a large kitchen table were seated four maids, and a couple of menservants; all, without exception, were definitely Teutonic in the cast of their features. One of the latter made to rise to his feet, but sat down again as McCarthy turned the barrel of his ugly-looking weapon upon him.

“I think you’d better remain seated,” the inspector advised grimly. “I should be very sorry to have to perforate anyone here with this gun of mine, but I can assure you that I will without the slightest hesitation if there’s any attempt at resistance from any one of you.” The barrel moved round to cover the chef again. “I think,” he went on pleasantly, “that you’d better be seated as well, Herr Chef—and over in that corner there where there aren’t any drawers handy, likely to contain cutlery. You’ll quite understand that you’re under arrest, though how far you’re guilty of anything against the peace of this realm will be gone into later.”

His eyes went slowly about the room taking in another two doors, one of which opened, he saw, into a large pantry. Crossing to it he found that it was illuminated and ventilated by a very small window, the outer side of which was covered with perforated zinc, and was certainly not one to be negotiated by any there who were all definitely of thick, not to say stodgy, build. Not even the slimmest of the maids could have been assisted through it, and as for the chef, himself, he would be as safe in there as behind bars.

“I’ll trouble you all, ladies included, to lift your hands in the direction of the ceiling, and keep them there—otherwise . . . Withers,” he continued when the order had been promptly obeyed, “just go round and pass your hands over the gentlemen’s clothes for any concealed weapons they may have about them. They probably haven’t any, but on the other hand they may have. I don’t think you need trouble about the ladies. They don’t seem to be the sort that would carry arms, or use them with any skill if they did.”

Mr. Withers having searched all the males so assiduously that the probability of their having anything lethal upon them was very remote, McCarthy indicated the door of the pantry with his pistol.

“The gentlemen first,” he invited, “and keeping their hands well above their heads. By the way,” he addressed himself to the chef, who despite the almost waxen pallor of his face was sweating profusely. “How many more are there in the servants’ hall—if that’s the correct term?”

He was told that with the exception of the major-domo, one Heinrich Buchel, the servants of the house were all present.

“Splendid!” McCarthy exclaimed, in very genuine satisfaction. “And perhaps you can also inform me what guests are upstairs—with the exception of one that I happen to know of.”

He was informed by one of the maids that the baroness was entertaining but one person at that moment, though they understood that she had others coming later to dinner.

“I fear they are in for a lean time,” the inspector said with a sad shake of his head. “Now step in, please, and make yourselves as comfortable as may be. And understand this,” he warned, “that there’ll be a man on guard who will have no hesitation at all about making himself extremely unpleasant to anyone who attempts to break out. No hesitation whatever,” he emphasized.

Closing the door, he carefully locked it, then proceeded to prop a chair beneath its handle. “I think we’ll have our friend the coalie upstairs just as a precaution,” he said. “If that professor of cookery chose to hurl his weight against the door I doubt either lock or chair would hold.”

“He’s scared stiff; he won’t try no bustin’ aht. When I run me ’ands over ’im he was shakin’ like a jelly.”

“We’ll take no chances,” McCarthy said, and, calling up the gentleman in question, proceeded to give him his instructions. As the gentleman, anticipating some such job, had brought his shovel with him, this latter article was considered quite sufficient weapon for the business in hand. As he assured McCarthy he would have no hesitation whatever in using it upon anyone of Germanic breed, male or female, having done two years in a German prison camp, he was left to the assignment with full confidence that his end of it would not go far wrong.

“And now, Withers, although not garbed for such an occasion, in fact, very much otherwise, we’ll depart upstairs to the drawing-room, and pay our compliments to the baroness. I doubt she’ll be pleased to see us, but we can’t help that.”

“I’ll bet as Sir William gets a surprise when we blow in,” “Big Bill” prophesied with a cavernous grin.

“I’ll bet he does,” McCarthy agreed. “In fact the certainty that he would is one of the biggest things I had in mind in getting him here. ’Twill teach him that even Assistant Commissioners don’t know as much as they think they do.”

*Chapter Xxiii The Inspector Clears Things Up!*

The baroness, in Sir William Haynes’ opinion, was at her very best that afternoon. Never, upon the several occasions that the Assistant Commissioner had the pleasure of being entertained by her in her own house, had she ever appeared so radiantly beautiful, so generally charming as upon that day. Whatever surprise may have filled her when the totally unexpected visit was announced, no sign of it or, indeed, perturbation of any kind, was permitted to show upon her features.

Just what the devil McCarthy was playing at in insisting upon his taking her by surprise in the manner that he had was more than Sir William could make out, but he was quite certain that that engaging officer would find himself very badly in the cart before he was finished if he attempted to involve this particular lady in the robbery in Whitehall. For his own part, he kept things professional sedulously out of the conversation, and explained his visit by the fact that he had had a duty call to make at another house in Grosvenor Square, and had availed himself of the opportunity. Nor did he even mention the name of Detective Inspector McCarthy, though more than once the baroness gave him very definite leads in that direction. Unquestionably the debonair inspector was a source of considerable interest to her.

But he noticed that, whilst the perfect hostess in every possible way, the lady was inclined to be somewhat restless, and moved about the room a good deal. In particular did she keep moving towards the huge bay windows of her drawing-room which opened out upon a marble and tessellated balcony overlooking the square and immediately overhanging a small, admirably-designed rock garden.

Despite the fact that the lady was graciousness herself, Sir William, in the circumstances, was beginning to find it difficult to make conversation against time—and how long McCarthy expected him to go on with this damned senseless tomfoolery he had no more idea than the dead. He had, as requested, given considerable attention to the lady’s butler, or major-domo, whichever she preferred to call him, when that certainly saturnine-looking person had served the afternoon tea. He most certainly had been entirely typical of the German under-officer, and one thing was very certain: that despite the perfection of his manner as a servant his appearance, with his heavy, brutish features, was far from prepossessing.

But, Sir William argued to himself even as he chatted gaily to the lady, that did not make his mistress party to a gigantic scheme of espionage. Plenty of thoroughly worthy people were ill-favoured, and it was no part of the English system of justice to judge a man by his looks alone. Had it been there were quite a number of eminently respectable officers at Scotland Yard itself who would have been sojourning upon the “Moor”.

And yet, as he watched the wonderfully gowned figure of his hostess moving gracefully about her drawing-room, there was an uneasiness in the mind of Sir William. McCarthy was not the man to make horrible bloomers of the kind which involved persons of social, and financial, consequence, where a mistake would have landed the administration of the Yard, and himself in particular, in the devil of a mess if things did not pan out the right way.

Recalling to mind the extraordinary speed with which the indefatigable inspector had joined up the robbery at Whitehall with the murder in Soho Square, and also, later, that of Mascagni as well as that of the old coffee-stall man, nothing he could do managed to shake the doubt which insisted upon lingering in his mind. It seemed incredible that there should be the slightest connection between this lady and those ghastly happenings, and he could only hope that when McCarthy got down to rock bottom he would find that he had been following a false trail where she was concerned. In any case he meant giving the inspector but another five minutes’ grace and then taking his leave of Grosvenor Square, and herself, for the time being.

But no more than two of those minutes had passed when he received what was very possibly the greatest shock of his professional career, for the folding doors of the drawing-room were suddenly flung open, and instead of the saturnine-looking Heinrich appearing to announce other guests, there upon the threshold stood McCarthy himself, while at the back of him towered the enormous figure of “Big Bill” Withers, his spanner clenched in his massive right fist.

And that McCarthy had been through a strenuous time since he had last set eyes upon him was only too palpable. Upon his face were marks of battle but recently inflicted, and which certainly would not be removed in a hurry. Additionally the ancient suit he was wearing appeared to be grimed with coal dust although his much bruised face was fairly clear of that substance. But what troubled Haynes most, when he had got over the shock of this unheralded appearance, was the look of quiet triumph which shone in the inspector’s soft, Italian-looking eyes; a look which he had seen too often to make any mistake about it. Whatever his appearance there and in that garb and condition might portend, there was no doubt in the mind of the Assistant Commissioner that, to use that pregnant American term, McCarthy had brought home the bacon once again.

For perhaps five seconds there was dead silence in the room, other than that ejaculation which had been forced from Haynes at the appearance of this strangely assorted pair. It was broken first by the Baroness Eberhardt, who had stood staring at this very different McCarthy from the one she had met at Verrey’s as she might have done at some apparition from the grave.

“This is a totally unexpected pleasure, Inspector,” she said without a sign of perturbation, but McCarthy noticed that the smile which came to her lips was fixed and rigid, and somehow gave a very different expression to her face.

“Well, now,” he said smoothly, “I don’t doubt but that it would be. In the circumstances I’d probably be surprised myself. But, somehow or other I had the feeling when I left you at Verrey’s that it wouldn’t be long before we met again.”

“Most interesting.” Then she turned to Sir William. “Had you any idea that Inspector McCarthy proposed to pay me this—er—unorthodox call?”

Sir William Haynes started, then glared at the cause of his discomfiture. “Not the slightest,” he answered quickly. “Though, in a way,” he amended quickly, “I sort of had an idea that he—er—would be somewhere in—in this vicinity.”

The baroness nodded. “I see,” she said thoughtfully. “Would it be asking official secrets to tell me the reason for this visit, Inspector? There is some motive behind your call, I feel sure.”

“Well, in a sense ’tis the result of following up a ‘hunch’ of mine to begin with. I don’t know whether the word is familiar to you, Baroness, it’s an American one and means doing a thing without the slightest rhyme, reason, or anything else at the bottom of it all: I do that sort of thing, as Sir William here can tell you, and an infernal nuisance I generally make of myself while I’m at it. ’Twas just such a ‘hunch’ that made me have your friend Baron Hellner—I believe that’s the name—followed out of Soho Square after the murder of the so-called Madame Rohner.”

“Ah, the Soho Square murder,” she returned lightly. “But first I should correct you upon one point. I have no friend of that name.”

“It’s probably not the right one,” McCarthy said smoothly. “But ’twill do for the time being. As for his not being a friend of yours then I admit that I am under a misapprehension. I got the idea through his calling here last night, after the murder of Mascagni.”

“Mascagni,” she murmured.

“Exactly, Floriello Mascagni. The man whose gang, at Hellner’s instigation, killed an inoffensive old man called Anselmi to get hold of his coffee-stall as a medium for getting the body of the pseudo Madame Rohner out of Soho Square.”

“Madame Rohner,” she murmured in the same vague way.

McCarthy nodded. “Quite so,” he said. “And that was the second reason that brought me here to-day. If you hadn’t mentioned the fact at Verrey’s that you had that morning been to consult your especial medium, clairvoyant, or whatever the right term is, and moreover informed Sir William and me that you had made the appointment by telephone, I should probably never have given you a second thought—in connection with the murder and the theft of those dispositions from Whitehall, of course.”

From him the baroness looked inquiringly at Haynes, who stared vacantly at the ceiling wondering what the devil was coming next, then back again at McCarthy. Her face was a perfect study in complete blankness.

“I’m afraid,” she began, when McCarthy with a wave of his hand interrupted her.

“We’ll come to that later. It will be sufficient for me to mention that I happen to know that the stolen papers were handed to you last night by the Baron Hellner and he was assured that Heinrich would have them out of England to-day.”

“Assured by whom, Inspector?” she inquired.

“By yourself, Baroness,” he informed her. “Your memory is surely not so poor that you’ve forgotten that. He brought them to you immediately he had received them at a dirty little wine shop in Soho, known as the Circolo Venezia, kept by one Fasoli—a place, by the way, with which you’re quite familiar, as you undoubtedly called there yesterday afternoon. It was after Hellner had left that place that our unpleasant little friend, Ludwig, murdered Mascagni, also at Hellner’s instigation. Unfortunately,” the inspector went on with his ingratiating smile, “his unfortunate lack of manners towards those he considers to be his inferiors in life, aroused the ire of a certain friend of mine, who followed him to Grosvenor Square, and, with great perspicacity, listened in upon the conversation you held with Hellner at your own door. A great mistake that, Baroness; it’s amazing how voices carry in the stillness of the black-out.”

The lady addressed said nothing; her smile was just as set as it had always been, but McCarthy saw her eyes wander towards the rope of an old-fashioned bell-pull set beside one of the bay windows opening down on to the square. Lazily he moved to place himself between her and it.

“It would do no good whatever, Baroness, to call either for assistance or—or whatever else it might be in your mind to do. The whole of your staff of servants are bottled up where they won’t get out in a hurry, with an extremely capable gentleman standing guard over them with a shovel. Heinrich is in equally bad shape, and certainly not in a position to answer any call upon him that you might make.”

“Heinrich is a captive?” she exclaimed sharply.

“Well—er—scarcely that, though quite as good. I had the pleasure, the extreme pleasure I might say, of knocking that gentleman stone cold before making my appearance up here. Or rather,” he corrected hastily, “my friend, Mr. Withers here, performed that very valuable contribution to this raid, and what he does in that line, he does very thoroughly, I can assure you.”

“Where is Baron Hellner now?” she demanded sharply.

“That particular gentleman, who, by the way, you don’t know, is at the present moment reposing in a cell at either Vine Street or Cannon Row police station, if everything’s gone according to my instructions, which I don’t doubt that it has. With him, or nearby, is that extremely beautiful, though I regret to say unlucky young lady, the Signorina Tessa Domenico, by whose aid Mascagni was put on the spot for his murder. By this time every soul concerned with that crime, and the Soho Square murder, is under arrest, with two notable exceptions, Ludwig and yourself. That will be rectified within the very near future.”

As he spoke he glanced through the window to see slowly coming into the square the car which had driven Tessa Domenico and her belongings from Doughty Street to Park Lane. At the wheel, perched up in his usual jack-in-the-box fashion, was the dwarf, Ludwig.

“Withers,” he said quietly, “if you go down to the basement you’ll probably run into the very one I was just speaking about. The dwarf we saw drive Tessa Domenico to Park Lane this morning. Make no bones whatever about him, and be sure to intercept him before he can get up to the kitchen where we have the others. I shouldn’t like to find our stalwart friend the coalie dead with a knife through his back, which would most probably be his finish if that gargoyle-faced merchant gets wind at what he’s at.”

“Leave that to me, guv’nor,” “Big Bill” said grimly, and departed swiftly out and down the stairs. At once McCarthy faced the baroness, all sign of lightness gone from him.

“I’ll have those stolen papers, Baroness Eberhardt,” he said grimly. “To deny any knowledge of them is simply futile. They were placed in your hands last night to smuggle out of England by the medium of your servant, Heinrich. In any case it is my duty to inform you that you are under arrest upon a charge of espionage, and, further, of complicity in, and accessory before and after, the fact of three murders. It is also my duty to inform you that anything you may have to say will be taken down and used in evidence against you.”

Just who was to do the “taking down” was rather more than McCarthy could have said at the moment, unless, of course, it was Sir William Haynes. That gentleman sat staring from one to the other of them as though his mind was in a perfect maze, and made no movement whatever to suggest that he was about to become McCarthy’s amanuensis in this paralysing business.

Without a word, but with a dejected shrug of her shoulders which seemed to acknowledge defeat, the baroness moved slowly towards an inlaid buhl table which stood just inside the door. Laying a hand upon the handle of one of its drawers she drew it open. But a certain sudden rigidity in the set of her back and her shoulders warned McCarthy that this woman was not yet defeated. With a sharp exclamation which brought Haynes to his feet, he dashed across the room at her and seized her wrist as she half turned, in her hand an automatic pistol! Swift as he was, she had even then time to open the safety catch and the bullet which most certainly would have found a billet in one or other of them ploughed through the ceiling of the drawing-room. Nor was it an easy matter to disarm her, for she fought like a wild cat and he was to find that that litheness of movement of hers was a matter of sinew, and not acquired grace. It took a full minute of hard struggle, in which he was aided by a still semi-dazed Sir William, before he forced her down into an armchair and handcuffed her by one wrist to it. Even then she left some fresh marks upon his already maltreated features.

“There’s nothing for it, Bill, but to have a squad here and go through this place from the cellars to the attic. Those papers are here right enough, you can be sure of that.”

At which moment Withers appeared, lugging up the stairs with his feet trailing against every tread, the inanimate form of the dwarf, Ludwig.

“I ’ad to land ’im one, sir,” he half-apologized. “ ’E may be short in the ’eight, so t’ speak, but blimey ’e’s as strong as a gorilla fr’m the waist up.”

“Tie him up, Withers, and make dead sure of him,” McCarthy ordered. “He’s due to swing for the murder of Flo. Mascagni.”

A shout went up from the street. Running to the window McCarthy saw the thick-set form of Heinrich stealing across the square as rapidly as it was possible for him to move without drawing too much attention to himself. In a flash it crossed the inspector’s mind that he was the person who had those papers in his possession! He was all ready to get away when Ludwig called for him with the car, as had no doubt been previously arranged. The baroness knew it and had she been able to have got that gun unmolested she would have held them up there until her servant got clear away. Heinrich had seen his opportunity for escape while the coalie was upstairs in that kitchen; had probably heard Withers’ scuffle with the dwarf and realized that it was now or never, if he was to fulfil his mission.

With a cry McCarthy flung open one of the long windows opening to the balcony, crossed it and without hesitation vaulted the parapet and landed in the garden with an anything but pleasant thud. For a moment it shook the wind out of him, but in the next he was over the fence and streaking across the square after the German as fast as ever a fox ran before hounds. He was nearly up with him at the corner of Grosvenor Street when the man suddenly turned and pulled a gun from his pocket. Without hesitation McCarthy charged blindly in at him, and a shot which would have most likely ended his mortal career whined past his ear as he came to grips with the man. As it was he took a wicked rap on the side of the head with the heavy weapon which, for a moment, sent him dizzy.

But by sheer main strength and the force of his attack he rushed the man back against the railings of a house as he thought; it proved to be the gate leading down to the area which flew open and the pair of them dived headlong down the stone steps. Twice the German’s head contacted heavily as they rolled over each other in their descent—and once McCarthy’s hit the side of the wall with force enough to send him sick and dizzy, but he clung on like a bull-terrier, although after the strenuous efforts of that day he began to find his strength waning.

But, as it happened, help was close at hand for the pair of coalies who had been left in Withers’ taxi had been observers of all that had taken place and were making their way to the spot at which the pair had disappeared as hard as their legs could carry them.

By this time Heinrich and the inspector were engaged in a slogging bout in which no rules were observed by either, and the German was using his feet as well as his hands to escape the fate he knew was certain to follow capture. Another couple of minutes would have seen that end well in sight, for McCarthy, though sticking to the much heavier man like a leech, was reeling in front of him like a man “out” upon his feet.

He had just taken a heavy kick which had nearly knocked what little breath he had out of him when the first of the coalies took the steps at a dive and, believing in the sound principle of an eye for an eye where a fight was concerned put his heavy number ten boot into the German’s stomach with such accuracy and force that the man doubled up like a jack knife. In the next moment the second was upon him and the pair bore him to the ground and kept him there while McCarthy searched his pockets. In a concealed one, stitched underneath the man’s shirt, he found the oilskin-covered packet which meant so much.

The trio were forcing the German up the steps again when a constable came round the corner almost on top of them. He was a young man but newly sent in from the country, and he stared at this curiously assorted quartette as though he could scarcely believe his eyes. In the brief time that he had known Grosvenor Square he certainly had never struck anything like this particular lot before.

“Give me your cuffs,” the most battered looking of the lot said in a tone of authority, and holding out his hand for those highly desirable articles.

“Not so fast; not so fast,” the C. Division rookie returned with a calm wave of his hand and speaking in a strong Wiltshire accent. “We’ll hear some more about this before I give anybody anything. This looks to me like a case of Common Assault.”

“It’ll be the most uncommon one you’ve ever heard of if you don’t dig out those cuffs when you’re ordered,” the inspector snapped at him, his hand still held out for the articles requested.

Doubt assailed the gentleman from the country. There was something in the tone of this battered-looking object that seemed to imply authority; a man, this, who sounded as though he was used to being obeyed when he gave orders.

“Who might you be?” C. 1674 inquired, the doubt he was feeling strong in his voice.

“Well,” McCarthy answered, through bruised lips, “I might be anybody, I might even be the Prime Minister or, come to that, His Holiness the Pope in disguise. I could even be one of the reigning monarchs travelling incognito. But as it happens I’m not. My name’s McCarthy, and I’m an inspector of the C.I.D. Do you want to see my Warrant Card?”

“No, sir,” he was hurriedly answered, and the cuffs produced and snapped upon the German’s wrists in the twinkling of an eye.

McCarthy looked at his fellow guardian of the peace, a whimsical twist at the side of his mouth.

“And how do you know that I really am Inspector McCarthy?” he asked quietly. “You’ve handed over your cuffs without the slightest proof that I’m who I say. I’ve seen men run out of the Force for less.”

“I—I took your word for it, sir,” C. 1674 stammered, a look of perturbation growing rapidly upon his face.

“That’s the way,” McCarthy said. “That’s the way, lad. Take everything that’s told you in London for gospel! ’Tis the most truthful town in the world. Follow up that idea and you’ll either be one of two things. You’ll either be looking for a job, or they’ll make you an inspector—and then the good Lord look after you for nobody else will.”

Contents

[The Great Trespass. 1](#_Toc149653811)

[What's Past is Prologue. 2](#_Toc149653812)

[Plastic Fantastic 4](#_Toc149653813)

[The Renters' Utopia. 5](#_Toc149653814)

[Between Drought and Deluge 7](#_Toc149653815)

[On Don DeLillo 9](#_Toc149653816)

[Why Boredom Matters 12](#_Toc149653817)

[(Soho contd.) 13](#_Toc149653818)