



**Traveller's tales**  
**Volume 3**

**olympia**

# Traveller's Tales

: volume 3

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**Olympia Press**  
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This book is dedicated to  
Christine Fisher





# Traveller's Tales

An Olympia Press Book

*"When you wake on a  
Mars, then at least you'll know  
you've come home, Germaine"*  
*Billie Strange*



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***Mr G***

*by*

***Michelle LeVagne***





## *Mr G*

The most striking thing about Mr. Gledhill, Sadie thought, was his unlikely abstemiousness.

Thus she thought as she mounted the stairs to the floor where all the rooms were marked with the addition of the letter 'a'.

That Monday, as she entered room 4a to clean it, she realized with surprise that not only was Gledhill standing there with his back to the door in the darkened room, but also that the room itself was tidy and well kept, requiring no cleaning at all.

Naturally, this came as a pleasant sensation, because

most of her male lodgers were untidy, and worse, frequently dirty.

Dirt was the problem, as this would make it incumbent upon her in her function as landlady to sweep or wipe every little area in order to assure cleanliness.

After all, that is what ones lodgers would expect of one!

Upper Berkeley Street stands at the more salubrious end of Mayfair, close to the cross between the infamous Edgware Road and Marble Arch Corner.

So, surprisingly at that time, Upper Berkeley Street composed an oasis of relative quiet, respectability.

George Gledhill turned to her, tearing his glance away from the street outside. For a moment a sharp, hard, light seemed to gutter in his eyes, but it may well have been a

quickly moving reflection from the mirror over the washstand.  
Nothing more than that.

"Oh, Mr, Gledhill...."

Sadie opened her mouth to speak but suddenly forgot what she wished to say almost half a breath through the sentence. The only trace of disarrangement that Sadies' eyes detected as she faltered, were the few scattered empty yellow and gold packets, with their attractive delicate mirror foil wrappers; Will's '*Gold Flake*' cigarettes.

The air was thick with smoke, but such niceties of irritation were not catered for in her mind at that moment. Anyway, Sadie liked men who smoked pipes and Mr. Gledhill was a smoker, it was as simple as that; and that was not a bad point in a man.

No, what engaged her

mind the very next second was his overall gentleness, perceptiveness. For he seemed to know what she had meant to think, then said:

"I gave the money to Mary. ....I paid for a month... I took the liberty because I knew that that would make things a lot easier for you."

"That's very kind of you, Mr Gledhill", said Sadie, charmed though she would never admit it: "...Actually, what I had thought was that you might like a spot of din...."

A week later Sadie turned the knob of room 4a, and found that it resisted her. She struggled for a few moments, then heard an indistinct voice:

"I'm rather ill, Mrs. Caird, could you possibly...?"

"Of course, Mr. Gledhill...are you sick, I mean very sick?.. Is there anything I can do to help?"

There was no answer, and

Sadie left it at that.

Later, she asked Mary what she thought that her mother should do:

"Oh, leave him to rest, mummy" -said Mary, "Look, I'll look in on him tomorrow and see how he is".

Mary twitched her nose, then rose and straightened her bouffant in the sitting room mirror. She thought for a moment to straighten the line of her nylons, and then realized that it would be ridiculous - after all she would not be seeing him until the morning.

Early next morning Mrs. Lauder, bearing a heavy load of shopping from Sells' shop, reached the second landing and puffed a little.

At that moment she noticed Mr. Gledhill leaning against the doorframe of his

half-open door and looking deathly pale. Next, she noticed that he clutched his arm.

"What's wrong?" said Mrs. Lauder, not knowing what Sadie had experienced the day before.

"Oh, I'm a little ill", said Mr. Gledhill, with a pale smile, and then sagged back into his room.

It did not take long for Mrs. Lauder, a trained nurse in her other life, to discover that Mr. Gledhill nursed a cut and abraded arm upon which the skin was crazed and suppurating and almost green grey and purple in parts. Knowing well what she saw, at once she got some bandages from Thomas Wallace, the large pharmacy just around the corner, and quickly dressed, washed and bandaged the unpleasant wound.

**Gledhill** lay in the half-dark of his room for a week or more before he received the care of a doctor, including the application of appropriate drugs.

Even after all this care, and the persistent nursing of Mrs. Lauder, who was busy enough with her children and her work, Gledhill still found himself in cold clammy sweat at unpleasant, irregular intervals, for many days.

"Were it not for you" he said to Mrs. Lauder as she cared for his arm one day, "I think I would have died".

"Well perhaps," said Mrs. Lauder in her stoical way, "but now you're on the mend - don't let yourself get tired".

One rainy afternoon Mr. Gledhill found himself sitting in the tiny sitting room of his landlady and her daughter,



children playing around him on the floor. He was feeling distinctly stronger. "Bang Bang!" said one of the children "Bang", returned Gledhill, using his now almost healed hand like a pistol.

The hand unexpectedly froze, as the muscles seemed to enter spasm; Gledhill blanched with the sudden pain. He looked up. Mary sat near to him and smiled.

"Tell me what happened, George"

"Oh, I'm with the Gas Board. ..and I got hurt by a big gas meter.. fell on me.....that's all... simple"

Gledhill's voice suddenly flicked on and off, a trace of Cockney or some accent, differing from his normal, rather clipped, English.

"You never said a thing about it"

"It didn't seem that

important at the time"

"Don't the Gas Board look after you, then?"

"Oh, yes...I've got leave, you see"

No-one asked more, though more could have been asked.

A couple of weeks later, one night one of the tenants, unable to sleep for some reason, heard a scuffling on the second floor landing and a soft '*damn*' as someone dropped something on the carpet. But the stair light did not come on.

Later, while vacuuming the threadbare stairs, Sadie found her daughter's diary.

"How did that get there?" she asked Mrs. Lauder, who was passing. Mrs. Lauder did not know.

Neither did Mary know, when she came in later, though she was pleased to see her diary again. Who

knows what secrets are contained in a young woman's diary.

That night Mr. Gledhill invited Mary to the Gaumont to see the film 'Run for Cover', and she accepted.

'What a fine pair they make', thought Sadie as she looked through the money that she kept in a shoebox under the cellar steps. She counted it and was surprised how many big green notes she had gathered.

'At least five hundred pounds'. Then: 'Yes, they do make a fine pair... and Mr. Gledhill is such a fine...'

"*Sensitive...*" it was later, and Mrs. Lauder was speaking to Sadie as they sat drinking a cup of tea in the basement flat and watching the gas flames bobble in the ceramic shapes

"...Kind of man... so polite"

"Oh, and rather good looking, nice, and tall.." replied Sadie to the thought, and then continued..."*and* so proper, and honest...! I do hope he and Mary will hit it off... so, well, *moral!*"

Mrs. Lauder kept silent at this, staring into the fire as if thinking.

"Umm..."

"I always think that romance..."

"Romance?"

"...Can be so nice!" Mrs. Lauder, who was very friendly with Sadie's daughter, sometimes had her misgivings. After all, it was better to be silent when one knew little.

A few days later the object of their discussion unexpectedly appeared in Sadie's rooms:

"Mrs. Caird?"

"Oh, hullo, Mr. Gledhill, I

heard that you've been stepping out with my daughter"

"If I may say so she's a lovely daughter, Mrs. Caird" said Gledhill, "A real credit to her mother".

"That's very kind of you... and I hope you two will be very happy", said Sadie, immediately thinking that perhaps the hint was a little strong at such an early moment. However.

"Oh, one thing" said Gledhill

"Yes?"

"Would you mind if I changed rooms? - I noticed that the large room on the first floor is empty now"

"Well," said Sadie, delaying the thought a moment because she had visualized a couple taking the room, "I suppose that I could arrange for you to do that..." She stopped and tried to find

space for thought, but finally submitted. After all, Mr. Gledhill was such a nice, neat, personable man

*.And Mary?*

"You can move tomorrow morning if you like" Gledhill's pale eyes seemed to light up.

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Caird", he said with feeling. Sadie liked being spoken to in such a sympathetic way, and all of a sudden she felt warm all over.

Returning to his room, somehow Gledhill passed Mrs. Lauder's doorway.

"Hullo!" He said. They chatted for a minute, and she invited him to have a cup of tea. They sat at the table. There was a delicate sympathy between them.

Some minutes later Mary breezed in.

"Hullo Guen", she

said through the blind angle of the door, "I have your money here". She proffered the money, stepped forward then stopped, seeing Gledhill.

"Oh, Hullo d- George" She sat down.

Mrs. Lauder took the money from the table and placed it in the box she used for such things, shielding its hiding place in the process from the others.

"Oh", said Mr. Gledhill, laughing, as he held Mary for a moment in his glance, "You don't have to do that Mrs. Lauder, I would never dream of stealing anything from you...after all I actually owe you my life..!"

"Don't be so theatrical", said Mary, irritated "You weren't that sick!"

"You'll never know, my sweet" said Gledhill.

There was a sudden coldness in his eyes.

# Winter mornings

can have clear, blue skies, though sometimes they are overcast and wet; that is apart from the snow, if such occurs.

One winter morning then, a series of sharp knocks on the bright scarlet door of number twenty six.

Cold, wet, boots on the stairway up to the large room on the first floor.

Much laughter and discussion.

The very next week, George Gledhill gave a party in his room on the first floor. Everyone in the house was invited, and his newly-arrived friend, sporting a broad Antipodean accent, was of course there too.

*“Took an immediate liking to our George!”* said the



stranger.

Later, Gledhill would tell Mrs. Lauder that his friend was a sheep farmer, who had invited him to Australia, and had even gone so far as to pay his passage, and give him three hundred pounds with which to buy himself some new kit.

He had the notes all there, crisp and blue.

In the meantime, however, the party waxed. Music was heard at top volume, which woke people sleeping on the next block. Still, no-body cared, as George was such a nice man.

Everyone drank too much; and alcohol being so expensive, no-body was willing to ask themselves where on earth it had all come from. Sheep Farmers are obviously rich, if they're Australians!

The party had become so

expansive, fuelled by not a few of the working girls from the houses opposite and also containing a selection of the cabaret dancers from number 24, that the full-flounced skirts of those guest's dresses made the battered stairway look as if some of its former glories were to be re-visited upon it.

Colourful flounces they were at that time, reds and blues, yards of net in the skirts to lift them and fill them. Where did the material come from?

At times like those, such luxuries were truly rare. Everyone seemed so well dressed!

At one point the heat in the room became so great that the French windows were thrown open, and people spilled out onto the small twin balconies, laughing in the dark night air.

Gledhill and Mary had quietly disappeared. But that was normal, wasn't it? Well, you know.

The floor bounced with movement. Everyone was having fun.

Everybody was ever so gay.

**There were** a few hangovers the next morning, but everyone was very jolly. Parties were rare in Sadie's life, though Mary seemed to take them in her stride.

Gledhill appeared later, at Sadie's door.

"Hullo, George!"

"Good Morning Mrs. Caird... have you seen Mary?...I'd' like to have a word with her..."

"Is it important?"

"Not really, Mrs. Caird"

"Oh, just one other thing,

George"

"Actually, I gave the rent money to Mary!" Sadie was always surprised by his amazing ability to outpace her thoughts. He seemed always to be one step ahead.

"Oh, the naughty girl! But thank you anyway, George."

Gledhill then returned upstairs.

Sadie imagined him resuming his normal position in the half-dark, clinically tidy, room and lighting another *Gold Leaf*.

Just what was it that George thought? ...His mind was a matter of mystery to her. Though he was still very nice.

Later, and Mary walked down the stairs slowly because her eyes were welling with tears. She wiped them and managed to make her face resemble its normal

self before her mother Sadie looked in.

Gledhill had told her that he meant to go to Australia with his friend, recently arrived in London. He said that he was awfully sorry, but a man must do what a man must do.... He had omitted to mention her place in his plans.

Two days later, Mrs. Lauder noticed that Mr. Gledhill's door was open, and that the room seemed full of neatly packed bags and cases. On her way to the front door she came across Mary:

"Is Mr. Gledhill leaving today?"

"No, not today", said Mary, "No, he's leaving from the docks tomorrow - in fact we're sort of having a send-off for him later"

"I shall be working this evening", said Mrs. Lauder, "Please give him my best

wishes."

"Yes", said Mary as she made her way down the steps so as to hide her tears. That evening Mary came in from work early, to meet Gledhill for their last evening together and instead found the place in an awful mess.

She called the police, and they in their turn found that most of the house had been ransacked; and all the rooms; even her mother's hidden cache of cash was missing. Drawers sagging out onto floors, shelves cleared with one sweep of a strong, healed arm.

They found Gledhill's room quite empty, and absolutely clean and tidy, as usual, you could say.

Likewise Mrs. Lauder's room, with the cracked cream and brown plastic radio still in pride of place on the chest of drawers, in-between the twin

windows.

But no sign of Gledhill - or George - as she had come to know him, nor of course, of her money.

Later, Mrs. Lauder returned from work looking tired: but of course it would have been impossible that she could have turned the entire house over so thoroughly. So it couldn't have been her, could it?

"No," said the anxious Detective Inspector, "This was the work of a professional!"

So they all tramped-off to Scotland Yard to look through huge tomes of pictures: and there, sure enough, was Gledhill, in black and white, rather flushed and stiff and formal, numbers on a board in front of his chest.

"George!..Oh! George!" said Mary while tears rolled down her cheeks.

"But that's George

Gledhill!" said Sadie in shock, as if it really were,.. "*and* he still owes me three months rent for the d-..!"

**Finally** then.

"And what was more," said the Inspector to an anonymous-faced typist as she scribbled away furiously... "Para,"

"No, that's wrong", said the secretary, wishing that she could repair to the ladies and straighten her straps.

"Sorry", said the Inspector, "I meant... well, to carry on... *ahem... Denham, after the nearly fatal accident which had occurred whilst he was attempting to remove a stolen safe from the Harrods depository (at that time apparently masquerading under the name Gledhill), also stole Mrs. Caird's cash, estimated at some three*



*hundred pounds, and some jewellery, as well as her daughter's honour... and I suppose everything else he could lay his hands on – but nothing from Mrs. Lauder.*

Extraordinary!" He was thinking aloud.

"What?" said the secretary, fresh from a Civil Service pool and well short on the niceties of social behaviour.

"I said..." said the Inspector, trying to maintain an even voice.

"That's wrong", said the secretary affirmatively.

"Is it – I mean, is it?" said the Inspector.

"I meant, not right", said the secretary, warming to her theme.

"Why not?" said the Inspector, warming to his.

"Why not indeed!"

**Russian Roulette**  
by  
Frank Lauder

## Russian Roulette

**The** vast places known as The Great Oriental Ouerg and its companion Sea, the Great Western Ouerg, are sufficiently curved and undistinct at their innermost edges for their names to haze into insignificance when one stands in the huge Sahara a few hundreds of kilometres east of Tammanrasset.

The Wadi and its namesake, the town of Tammanrasset, themselves lie effectively at the crossroads of this Sahara, in the Kingdom of

the Tanezruft, and sprawl, as spare, strangled and dusty as their inhabitants, on the soft sand boundary edge of the territory of those tattooed masked men, and powerful women, the Touareg.

Other natives of this area of the Sahara regard the Touareg with a respect based upon dread, and call this forbidden territory simply '*Le Sud*', or in the tongue, the language of those who toy with the idea of travel for it's own sake, '*La Sud*'.

**This** 'South', and it's focused looming distance, is as distinct from the general run of deep red sand as the Rockies are from the plains: characterized by bizarre, often threatening crags, which tower above this secret wasteland as if in witness of some frightful ancient fascination.

But who can say what has

happened in such an enormous, lost area, never visited by strangers, its floor only rarely disturbed by the feet of men or camels.

Even the half-buried oases and the Green guttering tops of almost drowned palm trees are rare in this South. That is, rare to the eye.

**In** March Nineteen Twenty-Six an elegant, silver-skinned, single-engined high winged monoplane of the very latest type, left Tucson in Arizona a world away, taking off from an isolated piece of waste land and logged to fly first west, and then due south, ostensibly carrying mails to Mexico City.

In reality the mails were jettisoned, to be found, intact but aged, late the following year by a cowboy, out mending cattle fences; and of course long after the monoplane flown, not in

fact to Mexico, but in reality to Honduras, where it disappeared into thin air, was winched, with its true cargo, aboard a ship near an obscure farm airstrip, lifted separately and heavily into the ship's hold, its fuselage and wings likewise crated.

Now there was a silence in time; for next the monoplane appeared, eighteen months later, at Alexandria, a little known but busy main transshipping point in the British Levant, where it was winched ashore then assembled, tested, and finally flown almost due south west.

**Some** time later a man known as Davidson, the new pilot, cut the fuel cocks, and the propeller clacked to a standstill.

Davidson stood five foot seven inches in his socks, was not handsome but strikingly good-looking, well educated, quick of wit: a person of rather

foolhardy courage and charm.

His weakness was boyish '*Adventure*', the sort that you read about in comic books, stories and cheap prints of Kit Carson, or newsprint fripperies about the Gold rush, a weakness which had prompted him to leave his job as a junior manager in a hardware company in Abilene Texas, and to follow his sense of danger.

But this was *real* adventure, and he'd been rehearsing the stories he'd tell around the bar one day in Abilene. Would anyone believe him?

Anyway the thought sent a chill down his spine despite the intense heat.

At first the stillness was frightening in its totality, then enticing in its apparent peace.

Now, Davidson stood, a few feet from the top of a dune, and sought he knew not what, with his eyes. After all, dunes were perfect camouflage for his

aircraft, nobody would see it unless they flew within a very close circuit. Davidson knew that.

There had been no aircraft here in the whole span of history.

Davidson also knew that, this time with a certain sort of secret pride.

On his hip, as a sort of promotional attraction, he rather jauntily wore a revolver, a Colt.32, a small, quite powerful weapon, still sticky with packing-grease.

It was unloaded and empty, he did not trust these people.

All the Colts and Mausers in the shipment were empty: that way they would be safer.

Instead, in his pocket he carried the six Winchester rimmed .32 cartridges. Just in case he needed them.

He waited in the dark shade cast by a wing, in his mind smoothing the back of his



hand along the crotch and the soft inner sides of the thighs of his girlfriend; he could imagine her growing moist with the anticipation.

Davidson had been waiting all day. Perhaps prompted by the enormous dryness of the desert, he remembered the smooth dampness of her skin after they had made love - she was, after all, such a good lover.

He turned back and watched the brass disc of the Sun begin to relinquish its zenith, shadows moved almost noticeably here.

This place had waited for strangers for a thousand years. A thousand years of days, the Sun only unnoticeably diminishing its zeal.

Each day would be the same.

So knew Davidson.

The monoplane had been heavily loaded, and he waited

for his meeting with impatience.

The fat tyres sat lower in the sand after these long hours, and the oil on the cylinders had become rimed with fine windborne grime; red, like rouge. Takeoff could be tricky, but was still possible, and explosives and arms were dangerous and heavy cargoes.

**Davidson** never left that nameless place.

Neither did the silver monoplane.

Horsemen cannot ride aircraft, even if they know how to ream cylinders with pullthroughs, check and clean fuel-lines and spin propellers that have no self-starters.

The monoplane remained there, and Davidson's body disappeared into the sand.

Time changed.

Time changed, and the seas shifted, changed out of all proportion and filled, flooded.

Eddies of sand entered the cabin of the monoplane and the hard disc of the Sun cast shadows as it traversed the sky.

Again and again.

The monoplane had all but vanished beneath the sea. Only the tip of the propeller still evaded the dunes.

There was no haste in their actions, but the traders who had taken the cargo of the monoplane had strewn unneeded materiel on the sand. Left it untidily behind them.

That, and a few overlooked items, for example a military compass, made of fine silver-imbued brass, one or two spilt rounds of ammunition from one box, which had been forced quickly in order to ascertain its contents, Davidson's revolver, still in a fine fur of sand which perfectly concealed it from searching eyes.

**Blinding** Sun.

Forgetfulness.

Now the dune had become just another of those thousand nameless cohorts, stacked-up like untidy waves clear to each horizon.

More time.

Sands moving; the tops of palms grazed by a few wild *Dromedaires* forming a deep hollow only a kilometer away.

The trace of water and a small, incredibly clear pool, from which creatures scavenged the precious water.

Morning; sunrise on one more numberless, uncounted morning. After the stillness and cold of the early hours, the absolute blackness of night; the first colours of dawn in the sky.

Two hundred miles away due west the guttural crackle of a lonely *muzzein*, decaying swiftly into the perfectly dead acoustics of the sand

The sand shifted as the camels slid down the

treacherous dune.

**Eugene** Lestocq had taken a sight of the palmtops, and decided to make directly for them.

Though it was still early and thus quite cool, there was no point in being particularly careful.

There was nothing out here, and this way they could find shelter before the heat found them, soon.

Half way down the dune Lestocq made as if to stop. Only impelled by inertia, he slid down and down until one foot contacted the invisible, metallic silver sliver of wing which banked invisibly beneath and now out, of the sand.

His mouth fell open in wonder; he had heard of this sort of thing before, but never believed that it could really happen.

Two hours later Lestocq, having hobbled the camels and put them to graze amidst the palms, had returned alone, and now had found the escape hatch door above the pilot's seat, clearing the sand away with gloved hands.

To his relief the cabin was quite empty, save for a sliver of sand, and he dropped onto the cabin floor, clipping the hatch shut.

The cabin was pristine, perfectly entombed and sheltered by the sand; even cool. Half the world so it seemed to him, was after him, and perhaps this would allow him a bolt-hole where no-one would be able to find him.

That was his first thought. To his surprise there were a few musty tins in the rear of the cabin, and a dried and shrivelled rubber liferaft, some old rounds of ammunition, and a long curved and inlaid knife,

begrimed with ancient colour.  
That was all.

That seemed to Lestocq to make this an ideal place to use for his trade. He sat back in the leather bucket seat, surveyed the horizon of darkness, to think.

This place was so unlikely that nobody need ever know it, except him. After years in the desert he knew his bearings as another man would find his way round a city block.

He scabbled around, found an old notebook under the seat, turned it over and spied the pencilled heading to an incomplete manifest, dated Nineteen Twenty-Seven.

Thirty years!

On the way out of the cabin, Lestocq saw a glint in the disturbed bed of sand, bent to find it, and picked up the brass compass, now burnished by the constant restless movement of the dunes. Motivated by his find

he sought around in the sand with his fingers, and at length, [after all, he had all the days to himself] his fingers found the pistol that Davidson had briefly worn. Unloaded, useful, though slightly pitted with the acidic action of Sun and sand.

**Lestocq** walked away from the monoplane, in a measured straight line up the dune, turned, and made a mental note of its position in relation to the set of the distant castellations of the shattered peaks of the Ahaggar and the tops of the palms a kilometer away.

Eugene Lestocq was not alone, much as he would be surprised to learn, in this area of the world.

There were others who prized this central desert as a crossing point and a perfect means of communication. Added to this, his success and



the illegality of his various projects not only made him a wanted man, but also one required for means of trade. He had become wealthy on the proceeds of his business, and the large amount of money so mustered was now securely 'laundered' and invested in London, New York and of course, Frankfurt.

**Some** months later Lestocq re-crossed this part of the Sahara, this time leaving some jewellery in the cabin of the monoplane. He had traded the stolen jewellery for the new explosive *plastique* only at that time in development. Actually, *plastique*, gave him a shiver down his spine when he saw how it sweated so, as soon as the temperature rose. He did not know whether it was unstable, but he knew its explosive potential and it worried him a little. At any rate,

business being business, he traded the explosive to some local tribesmen, took the jewellery, and breathed a little easier.

Lestocq pushed east, taking a couple of camels and beginning to imagine what he would do, soon, when he managed to retire. This would be his last trip; he would return to his flat in Kensington and re-assume his other identity. He had made sure of the double-cut-out which he had designed so well, years ago; he could now comfortably disappear.

Lestocq walked three hundred kilometers in the next few weeks, passing Marraba, Mabrus, Tummo, Lebo and other isolated oases - seeking his final coup; the lodestone that had always so attracted his mind: the final kill, The Big One.

Now he was walking directly west, dead upon the

Tropic of Cancer. The Mannlicher weighed heavily upon his shoulder and when he found and then passed a group of black flapping Touareg tents he sold it for a piece of rancid goat's cheese, and a new camel for the old one.

He stopped only to pick up water: his eyes were hazed by the glare and the immense heat and the bitter cold of the night. He hardly resembled the Alsatian that he once was, any more. His footsteps wavered.

There was a story that he had heard, a traveller's tale about a place in the Soudan, a group of ancient step-pyramids worn almost to the surface of the desert by age: he had heard that there a man had found a vast fortune thirty metres beneath the harsh, stony ground. Vast, forgotten storehouses beneath the seventy steps, traversed along a broken corridor in total

darkness. The last resting place of Prester John, perhaps?

**He** turned his burnt face east once more, traced the dashed line of Cancer and made a mental adjustment.

By night he took a star sight: the brass marching compass was not merely good looking.

He sat on the ground: 24 degrees West. The sand had lost its familiar red and was now dusky light beige; almost like a beach in Jutland he had once found himself on as a boy.

Thoughts like this ran through his mind, day on day, worn and ageless and now as undulating as the desert floor itself, kept him running, like fuel.

He had used up all the food and there was no longer a horizon in this desert.

There was nowhere to run

to any more.

Lestocq choked and laughed in the dead lands where winds never blow, where nothing has changed for ten thousand years, in the sands between the lost kingdoms of Unianga and Erdi.

His footprints echoed across a frozen plateau and shared the dust with a myriad crisscross of other ancient prints; a thousand eerie years of journeys out beyond the gates of any Eden.

Lestocq did he but know it, was suffering the hallucinations of exhaustion and heat, known as '*Cafard*'- desert fever.

A bewitchment as old as the metallic rocks that echoed close beneath the sandy floor with perfect acoustical clarity.

Lestocq was now veering from his course, or perhaps had aimed himself for the so called Blue Nile, at its source, for now he had turned rather south,

turned towards the deadly Sun.

On the thirtieth day of walking, Lestocq's foot caught the crude metallic pineapple-like outline of a powerful anti-personnel percussion grenade-cum-mine designed by the Russian Imperial Armourer to avoid the International Explosives Agreement of 1898, it had been produced in Dijon in 1910, released of its pin the still bright copper of the trembler had hardly moved in all these years.

Oddly enough, this was part of Lestocq's first armaments contract more than twenty years before, a forgotten implement of an unknown conflict; a contract originally paid in Austrian Seventeen Ninety-Seven Maria-Theresa silver Thalers, one of which he still carried in his baggage.

But Lestocq was not to know that.

**O**n the eighteenth of November Nineteen Seventy-Eight an old Chrysler desert truck, its compass malfunctioning, wandered far off the track and discovered the unmoved carpet, following first the trace of Lestocq's perfectly sharp, apparently new footsteps, and found nothing, apart from the dust marks created by a wild explosion.

The driver ventured no further, knowing what havoc a mine could reek, and turned the vehicle.

On the way back from this benighted land towards the sand sea, whilst inspecting a tyre for possible damage, he thought he saw something in the sand, kicked at it, and then picked it up.

What he had found was a badly crumpled and corroded Nineteen Twenty-Six US military pattern Colt .32 pistol: curiously, there were no

**cartridges in the cylinder.**





*Shore leave*

*By*

*Frank Lauder*



## *Shore leave*

**W**hen the ship had finally docked, arriving late and at long last after a hot midsummer's dawn when the Sun was high in the sky, the Captain red faced and perspiring, the mate swearing at the deckhands as loads skipped from their perspiring hands, the 'Boys' (for so they always called themselves) decided to go onshore.

And not a moment too soon, to judge by the rumblings that had broken-out as deep as the engine room. Now they wandered through the wrought iron of the harbour gates, along the battered wharfside sidestreets and the battered wooden warehouses, and then were greeted as always they would be in Capetown, by waiting touts spotting their uniform jackets and their fine brass buttons, eager for custom.

The dusty hot streets with the

characteristic low-rise buildings, part stone or some kind of brick, part timbered, with their local variations upon the American western-style false front that one so commonly saw here in Colonial Africa.

"This way Sir... Show you nice shops or..." The touts cried with enthusiasm.

The offers would quickly broaden. That was to be expected. But the boys shook their heads, preferring to explore such an interesting foreign town by themselves.

Having dodged down various alleyways and walking quite a distance, thus loosing their ever-interested escorts, after some fifty minutes they found a wayside cafe, a little way back from a main street where the occasional ox-cart still raised the dust from the old deep ruts, as black metalled motor transports rattled past.

So they sat in the shade of the gaily-

coloured umbrellas and called for ice cold beer. At long last, such were the scents of Araby!

Ahhh! Such was the quality of luxury in such an isolated place. The icebox crackled as bottles were clawed from the iceblocks.

They drank. Delicious.

Now, Jack was older than Harry, and this made him wiser, or so Harry thought. Besides, Jack had been around to other strange and fragrant places: stories there were, of Alexandria, and Fuzzy-Wuzzies in the Dutch East Indies, strange encounters in lonely dusty places recalled over a rum on a dark stormy night in the fo'castle, the air thick with those brackish dark cheroots, as tortured as a vine-root or a briar. And as pungent as those tales, too.

Suddenly Jack's eyes had fastened on something opposite. He sprang up and briefly reconnoitered, returning some moments later.

Harry was enjoying a real Havana,

and the time had flown.

"I say Harry," said Jack: "What a coincidence - that house over the way is the home of a friend whom I recall from years ago... I think I'll call and say hello...order me another beer will you, there's a good chap...Won't be long!" Jack strolled across the dusty street to a narrow cobbled opening and wielded the huge old brass knocker. Bang! The impact echoed beyond the door, emphasizing the cavernousness of its interior. Marble against brass, like a bell, only darkly.

The carved wood of the door creaked open Jack gave a wave and Harry saw the blink of a woman's face as light flicked over their faces.

Jack turned and briefly waved once more, then was gone. Harry ordered Jack's beer, and drank his. Five minutes passed. Five more minutes.

Then he drank the second beer before it became warm, and called for more. Still, Jack had not reappeared. Despite the comfort of his seat, he

shifted uneasily. An eternity seemed to pass: Harry had emptied several more glasses of beer, the streets were gradually emptying, and now he was aware that he was alone. It was very hot, very quiet.

Last customers eyed him as they emptied their drinks, stubbed out their cheroots, cigarettes, went their respective ways. His Havana was long since dead, laid in the silvered ashtray, removed. He must go and get Jack.

Crossing the street, looking up curiously at the quiet, odd, house, he felt his boots contact the cobbled surface as he approached the door.

He wielded the knocker. That same echo into the house that he remembered from earlier.

The door opened quite suddenly. It was the woman that he'd glimpsed in the strong light beam and shadow.

"Yes?"

"Jack?" He screwed up his little courage and put on a brave front as he



would imagine a true Scotsman would do. Besides, he was a Sailorman too. So he peered into the darkness. He could see nothing. It seemed fragrant, slightly damp, reminding him distantly of home, inviting.

The air column vibrated, moved.

Then the door swung open; before he could logically expect it to. When the door closed he was startled by the darkness and coolness of the hall. Rubbing his eyes, he turned round to speak to the woman. She had disappeared. *Where?* It was cool and still.

He stood there for a while, feeling suddenly annoyed with Jack. Where was he? How irritating it was!

His first impulse was to find the door, and get out. Unease worked in the back of his mind. After all, Jack could come on when he was ready; why should he wait for him? But at the same time, where was he? Why was it so still in here! What manner of people were these friends of his?

Despite himself, beneath his studied exterior he knew that he had begun to panic. Was something wrong?

There was a movement to his right. He turned, sharply.

There stood the woman, framed in the doorway. Silence, while she looked at him there was a lighted lamp in her hand.

"Go to him", she said abruptly. "I'll show you the way - down the corridor and to the right there is a stairway".

He turned, as if to protest, and then stifled it as he saw her cross to the door, turn the key in the lock and then put it in the drawer of the hall table.

A revolver appeared, as if from nowhere, and was pointed at him. He could see the muzzle clearly, pores of rust in the etch of the blunt lines. An old revolver.

"Go on", said the woman, "I have much to do." Then she seemed to think for a moment. "This will make you hurry", she said, waving the killing weight of the machine at him.

She laughed hoarsely. Harry felt

confused. He hesitated briefly, and then started walking down the darkened corridor. His pale eyes were beginning to accustom themselves to the general gloom. To his right was a stairway.

Shakily, he proceeded up the stairs. He was given instructions-'*Turn left then right Again!*' The passages in the darkness of this house seemed never to end.

All he could hear above the thumping of his heart was the steady measured tread of his self-appointed assailant.

He confronted a door, in that wing of the house towards the rear, past a beautifully figured Moorish courtyard and through a set of interior courts. He had seen the yellowish late afternoon sky, and heard the sounds of sparrows chattering over some small crumbs. He knew there was foliage near here; he heard the wind shifting through the listless leaves of some lost tree.

"Unlock the door, and walk in". He tripped the latch and felt it give.

An angle of light gradually deepened and became complex.

Now he moved into the room. Black and white floor, squared; a broken frieze of figured Dutch tiles. Apart from this the room was bare.

His eyes discovered more space, his senses sharpened by his growing terror and concern for his friend.

"My God!"

At first dimly, and then clearer than he could imagine, there was Jack, lying upon his back apparently asleep upon the bareness of the cold stone floor.

Harry was at once upon his knees beside Jack's form. The chest still warm, the head lolling and the eyes half open. He touched Jack's shoulder as if to wake him.

Now against the regular black and white of the floor there intruded an irregular pattern of red.

"Jack...Jack!"

No movement, no reply. He turned towards the woman, an attitude of regret

in his eyes: there she was in the doorway, lamp in one hand, revolver in the other, tight-lipped, grim, cruel..... Motionless.

Helplessly, he looked around peered anxiously at Jack again. Horror suddenly overcame him. Despite his youth he'd seen many dead in the War and now he knew.

The red was blood, *Jacks good blood!*

The woman meanwhile had put the lamp down and swiftly bent over Jack, pressing her hand in the blood and wiping it onto the white of Harry's shirt.

Somehow, she laughed:

"You are the murderer!" Then. "Pick him up quick and do as I tell you!"

Humbly, Harry lifted Jack's body and cradled it in his arms. Five steps into the corridor and the darkness and then three more to the lip of a trap door which was let-in to the mosaic of the passage: the woman lifted the trap:

"Go down" For a moment he hesitated: then, summoning his courage and a firm voice from somewhere, said:

"No, you just go first".

The woman laughed, but started first down the ladder.

And then in a split second, despite his load, he managed to trip the lid of the trap and it slammed down. There was a scream and a series of sounds of falling. He dropped his friend's body and began to run back down the serpentine corridors of this house.

He managed to overshoot his turnings once or twice, running into echoing wings where the dust rumbled thick underfoot, where ancient colonial furniture stood, undisturbed for many years.

He rushed from room to crumbling room, down more gloomy passages, stumbling along the stairs till he suddenly arrived at the small entrance hall, the street door, which he recognized mainly from the smell of the dry dust the hot end-of-day outside and the light.

Scarcely daring to draw breath, remembering the key in the dresser, he

scrabbled in the dry old wood of the drawer...

He had it in his hands, and then he dropped it, finally, into the lock.

Clack! The door opened upon the street. He started violently as a voice said:

*"You'll never get away!"*

Turning sharply, with thoughts of evasion, of speed, of death in his mind he saw her there behind him: the woman: that dreadful killing instrument in her hands pointing at him.

"No... No!" It must be too late.

He gave one last, despairing, stifled shriek. He was running or protesting or imploring, now all was gone, lost; and his friend was dead. What could he do?

The ground seemed to move slightly left, then right, shifted across again, and seemed to check and start back against some kind of restraint. It stopped briefly.

The woman's eyes gave a glint of knowledge...

Then he awoke. Someone was

calling, ox-carts or orders, a soft crump as a load contacted somewhere and slewed, still under lift.

The Sun moved in a band against his face. *Now he knew.*

The ship moved easily against the cables: now the Sun was up.





**Bold Souls**  
by  
Glaucus Ebert



## Bold Souls

Arran stopped the Volvo outside the gates, turned the CD off, leaned out, and pressed the button. A light glowed brightly and then the metallic click and accompanying buzz reminded him that the lock securing the tall thick gates had been released.

The general look of the place, the health farm, or whatever you might call it (as it was really a cure centre for the well off), took Arran rather by surprise. The gates were enamelled steel, presided over by the unwinking eye of what could have been a camera. Security, he supposed. Security would naturally be important after all, *'They'* were important people, weren't they?

Mind you, Arran's was not a technical mind, he being

more at home with films and books than computers. It had taken him an age to find that darn button, for a start. Anyway, he really must relax this couple of weeks, and then return to the fray. He would give himself selflessly to the experience. He must enjoy it, totally.

A charmer in a body-hugging leotard seduced him to the reception. Now he would learn about this place. The inside of the old farm (as it once was) had been newly, cleanly modernized and was pleasantly arranged in the style of a sporting club, well designed in a style that neatly folded one area away from the others, so that each section came as a sometimes, oftentimes, welcome surprise. But now to business. He knew that he was overweight, but that hardly bothered him, he would soon lose all the flab.

What really worried him was the possibility of being pushed into unwelcome activity. Let me tell you

one thing; you see, actually, Arran hated activity; he would rather a *Café Crème* than ten minutes physical jerks.

The first day went by slowly, tediously. At length he felt his body, rather clammy, rather sweaty. He felt unwontedly tired. All this activity was far less pleasant than just sitting at the VDU, punching-up numbers and making lots of dough.

Fortunately there was a bar, and he found it (just where he had not expected it), then thankfully relaxed his wracked frame in a cane chair, and watched others such as he pretending to do energy-expensive things. Yes, he noticed now that occasionally one of his fellow 'unfortunates' would furtively drop-in for a drink. But at this time (this time, at least - Oh, horror of horrors!) they, the powers that were], would only serve *fruit juice*. He prayed that later they would find the excuse in themselves to serve a doctored gin or

two, or perhaps a little *Bailey's!*

What a hope! He felt a little dizzy after all this. He leaned back and closed his eyes, feeling his pulse under one arm; a sharp reiteration of a distant memory of pain. How could one get fit painlessly?

How, really? *'Tell me?'*

**He** awoke after a few moments, and realized that he must have been dozing.

The light was failing, and as he looked across the now changed park, people were altogether more relaxed, more languid. Colours too, due to the intense light, subdued though it was, seemed more saturated, and he glimpsed a cameo of lights, prettily through a short canopy of leaves.

A sort of halo effect.

Mysterious, but only in his mind.

His reverie lasted just a moment.

A man with a rather handsome, rather tired face, of indeterminate age but perhaps of around thirty, had lowered himself into the whicker chair across the table.

"Would you like a drink?" The question was not expected.

"A drink...I thought..?"

"I always have a gin before I fly"

"Isn't that..?"

"Well?"

"Um"

"I know, you'd like a gin and *it*... sort of, before dinner *Ha, Ha!*" The stranger laughed. "I used to pray for dinner: you can't fly fighters in the dark!"

"Oh, really?"

"Don't you fly?"

"I'd..."

"We reckoned that if you'd made



it through to the evening in one piece, then you warranted dinner and a few beers to straighten you out!"

"Oh"

"Poor bugger, I thought they were all fliers, here"

"Well, I don't know... you see I thought..."

"God, *I used to like fighters!*"  
With feeling.

"Did you?"

"Before they retired me to Beauforts"

"Oh, *Beauforts*"

Privately, you see, Arran was determined not to be left behind, sensing here something important that he somehow knew with a secret urgency that he must stay abreast of. He hoped that he had a sufficiently confident air.

The stranger seemed to think so: he said:

"Johnnie..!" Extended a warm, long, soft hand.

"Oh...Arran"

"Here it is...old man!" Before the

drink arrived, he had a very few moments to collect his thoughts. The stranger was slightly suntanned, confident and rather bluff in manner, of rather short stature and quite fine of limb. He was quick of wit and mind, and seemed to have already accepted him, Arran, as a comrade. He seemed suspiciously fit to be in a place like that.

‘Nevertheless’, Arran thought, ‘Well, some people are fit anyway!’

Arran warmed to this, you see, he liked to be in the company of expansive powerful people; after all, in the cold winds of the electronic age, friends were becoming increasingly important, if only for reasons of status. He felt suddenly warm, and the coldness of the arriving G&T served only to reinforce the exquisite Yin-Yang of this corner of his life.

He felt suddenly expansive. He took a sip of his gin. He began:

"That was interesting about the B..."

"The Beauforts, old boy?"

"Yes the Beauforts..."

"Flew them out of Leuchars, you know that pimple on the arse of Scotland. My God, what a hole."

Johnnie shivered as if in acute memory of cold wind.

"Yes, the glasshouse leaked like a bloody colander, and that was before the flak ships punched some more holes in 'em!"

"Tell me more..." Arran took a draw on the gin. "What was that about?"

"Called the War, old boy!" Johnnie gave him an odd look.

They sipped on in silence for a moment.

"Ever heard of heavy water?"

"Atomic ...*things*?"

"Right....good show....well, you see our job was to stop the coasters carrying the stuff...long way across the North Sea. We had to fly across the ditch and our kites got all covered with ice and that caused drag (which decreased speed), so we had to fly

low, you know, fifty feet or so, to keep the flying surfaces reasonably warm."

"How far was that?" Johnnie gave him a glance of not understanding, and then continued, almost as if reading from a script.

"Three hundred plus miles there, at around a hundred and ten knots outward bound. That took something over three hours, if the navigator wasn't as pissed as a newt. Bloody cold for him, and looking face down through the Perspex at the waves was guaranteed to turn his stomach over. Let alone the stress. Yes." He reached agreement with himself.

"Have another drink" said Arran.

"One here, old boy"

"Rough ride, was it?"

"Bloody rattle traps, banged and whanged over the waves. Surprising they actually could carry a bomb load. Got us there- that was Norway, you know-and sometimes back. We'd land back around dawn generally, frozen solid, lots of holes everywhere -

in the nose - from flak. Bloody awful. Rudder like a flaming torn flag, whistled a nasty tune all the way home, you know."

"So how did you get to Leuchars?"

"Roundabout route, via Biggin and Tangmere... want to know?" Arran was warming to his interest.

"Very interesting..please.."

"Tell me if I bore you, old man, won't you." Johnnie straightened, or perhaps loosened, his cravatte.

"I find all this very interesting...Really!"- Arran took a long draw on his third (or fourth) gin and tonic. Such information might brighten-up some wilting dinner party, one never knew quite how.

"Well" said Johnnie..."After the big bust-up started I was mobilized into a Spit squadron at Biggin. But there weren't any bloody spare Spits without large holes in them, and there was also an awful shortage of motors that worked, and to cap it all I had only done forty hours up to then,

so they put us in Hurri's. Slower, more manouverable you know. Anyway, they gave me a spare Hurricane: later on I found that it was a reconditioned wreck, but with all that new paint on it, who was to tell? My young eyes couldn't see the bloody patches in the fabric! So I flew a couple of circuits in it. Wonderful new toy. T for Tommy it was, blue four. My leader was called George, nice man, and I was number four, you know, danger man in a finger four. My close, old school friend was called Paddy, and he flew number two. Lucky, up to then. You lived and died fast, in that sky.

We scrambled a few times, but there was little doing. But then came my first real show. One day, early on, there was a nasty raid forming over the Channel and we were scrambled. Around eleven o'clock it was, enough time for Gerry to have his *worstchen* breakfast before blitzing the Brits ('part from the fact I'm a bit Gerry myself, but it's the nice bit!)Anyway -

Actually, let me tell you that I'd had a couple too many whiskies the night before and wasn't a hundred percent compus-mentus myself, when the fitter strapped me in. Cold feet! I'd say, bloody cold feet! I wanted to run home screaming to my mum but I was too drunk to do it. They turn the engine on for you, you know, and you're sitting in this deathtrap with the radio crackling like mad and planes all over the field... No turning back. God, I was sweating. The fitter did my helmet strap up because I was so white with fear... You know, they knew darn well."

Johnnie took a long draw at his glass.

"I have no idea how I nursed the crate into the air. She waddled like a pregnant duck, and my leader saw me in his mirror and screamed at me. *Pull her up, you fucking idiot!*' Anyway, she staggered over the perimeter trees and I followed the formation, weaving in the approved fashion. Defence like this was

garbage, really. After all, the Huns were at an advantage of at least four to one, sometimes as much as ten to one, numbers-wise." He took a deep breath and smiled, unaccountably.

"Anyway, I remember that day that the bandits were at 14 thou and we were away early enough to have climbed above them before they actually arrived. We climbed to Angels 17, which was about the service ceiling of those old crates, and stogged around up-sun, where the buggers couldn't see us. Ha! Ha!"

Johnnie broke off and rubbed his thigh, laughing. The secret seemed to have been revealed.

"Nice to be in the advantage for once, hey! Well that didn't last long! More Messerschmitts, 110's and 109's were stacked up in layers, busy bees, above us in the Sun.

We had to hit and scarper.

Anyway, our job was to get the Heinkels and Dorniers.

I saw from about ten miles, in the perfectly clear air, a few Junkers



87's, flying antiques, even then, and a few Stukas thumping along...mind you, the advantage of the Stukas was their slowness: even in a Hurricane, sometimes we had to lower the wheels to fly slow enough to get a pot on them.

Anyway. That day was our advantage, we were up-sun and we dropped on those bombers like avenging angels.

Through the first screen from behind the buggers, very little gunfire, wonderful, crazy flying, like a mad high-speed lift; nothing quite like the sensation..... And then the dizzy red-out as we were pulling up under the buggers bellies.

The Heinkel 111 type at that time had no belly-gun, and only one inadequate little bubble gun. Like through a clear lens, I remember dropping through the Dornier 217's above, with very little trouble, as I said, from their armaments, then reducing throttle right under the belly of a Heinkel.

The Hurricane bucked like a bronco in the slipstream and the turbulence of the engines and the gun sight was practically useless.

Then I gave her a little rudder and as she slewed she cleared the foginess of the contrail, and I was face to face with the bubble gunner. God! I looked at him, a bloody twenty year old virgin like myself, and he looked at me and we could have been going out skeet shooting together; '*Hullo*' I said.

But that lasted only a few seconds, because out of the corner of my eye I saw poor Paddy's aeroplane explode in a shower of sparks, then the intercom picked up and deafened me. My erstwhile friend the bloody bubble gunner was trying to blast my head off! So much for friendship! I was sitting there like a dummy, I pressed the gun button, but in real fear; just a reflex really, and only six of the buggers fired. My kite had ten, but she was an old wreck, as I told you earlier.

The old bus suddenly slowed down as if I'd hit the brakes with the recoil of the guns, and I nearly went through the screen. Bizarre then, for at that moment too I saw a neat set of holes punch into the shiny steel of the belly of the Heinkel, then continue along the wing towards the nacelle. I saw a few flashes and the prop feathered itself. Glycol fog squished out of the wing, and the engine, and an aileron broke away, and nearly took my head with it.

I must have ducked momentarily. It was all in slow motion, that engine beginning to windmill, and the glycol fogging out behind the nacelle in the contrail, with the poor bloody gunner looking transfixed at me, like looking in a surreal mirror. And all in silence; well, the noise of airflow and motors was such a din that it had the effect of making silence in your head. Moments like that seem to photograph themselves in your mind. Better than snapshots!

Now George was shrieking in my headphones: but I was all hazy. Suddenly the canopy shattered and the Hurri seemed to break away from my control and zoom upside down.

**There** were flames blowtorching at me from behind the blind-flying panel and the stick actually seemed to have attached itself to the silk glove on my hand. My fault. Bloody slow reflexes, you see".

Johnnie raised his hand and Arran could see the deformation caused by the burn-scars.

"I'll carry the imprint of the stick handgrip for ever!..."

Johnnie seemed to have grown weary of his story, but he also seemed fixed to continue until Arran grew restive. He continued:

"Anyway, suddenly I was falling through the air, and I suppose someone found me in a tree. Of course my parachute had saved me. I was months in the sanitarium. Pain

in the arse! Burns, you see; reflexes fucked-up". Arran noticed the inflexion.

"How amazing!" he said, a little weary, "I always find stories like that incredible."

Johnnie brightened, and began to emerge from what had seemed for a moment to be a fixed, negative, pensive mood.

"You do, do you?"

"Look, you must tell me more, I've always had this fantasy about making some sort of programmes about real adventures like these, or even writing it all down in a book!".

Unexplainably, Johnnie gave a deep guffaw.

"Fine chance from our predicament!"

Now the chair creaked and he had arisen. Johnnie had an unexpected sense of humour.

"Lets have that snack then, and I'll tell you some more useless tall stories."

# Arran

followed Johnnie into a large low room that he had previously overlooked. Of course it was much as one might expect the health farm, in fact any health farm, to use for a restaurant, but with the exception so it seemed, of those svelte young female trainers in their leotards who always seemed to manage to captivate one's senses. It struck him as logical that they should find their own pursuits more exciting than spending this long colourful spring evening located in their workplace.

Logical, of course.

They ate slowly, and he savoured the delicate flavours of the Mornay; tasted the wine. It was all very delicate.

He had begun to enjoy this place.

"I wonder what the programme will be in the morning" he said.

"Oh, much the same thing as

always", said Johnnie, flashing his grey eyes over the rim of a glass of delightful Monbazillac.

When Arran thought back about it, those eyes were a little clouded.

"Oh yes," he said, wondering how Johnnie knew.

After the dinner Johnnie found a couple of Havana's somewhere, and they settled down in front of a warm fire in the chill of that colourful moment, each with a balloon of *Vieux Sec*.

In many ways it was a perfect, quiet evening.

From where they sat the sky was not visible, as a damascened partition of some sort neatly divided the room.

Now, Arran noticed that the people in this set of rooms were noticeably more friendly. They frequently smiled and made him feel most welcome. Pleasant of them. Very comfortable.

"Tell me more" he said at length.

"Well, if you want" said the

other, "But we all have stories and I don't wish to bore you"

"Oh no, not at all!"

The leaves arbouring the fireplace and the antiqued library struck a very brilliant green, though patently alive, as well.

The blue of the sky had earlier been a really very vibrant cerulean, deep as the dusks of bright summer.

"What happened after your tour at Leuchars?"

"Oh, they sent me to a desk for a couple of months, and I got bored with that, so I applied for a transfer."

"Where was that to?"

"Place in the midlands. We flew Beaufighters. Painted black. Nice steady gun platforms, and quite fast too. They'd known from my medical that I had night eyes. Night fighters, you know. Chasing Junker's 88's. Mostly in from Brittany, Normandy: places like St. Omer, just across the road, really. The Huns'd stooge around early mornings, and shoot-up the bombers as they came in from



sorties. Lost lots of brave men that way... so our job was to pick the Bandits up on H2S - *radar*, you know - and try and creep-up behind 'em. Big engines on those 88's, and the exhaust stubs would look like bright lights from the rear. I took pots at a few. But most of that flying was merely gut busting; nights spent scared shitless that you'd fly into the next bloody hill or that a friendly bomber would blow you to blazes. I can tell you that after sixty trips things were wearing thin on me. Too much solitude you know. There's only room for one in the front end of a Beaufighter."

"You did sixty trips?"

"Five hundred hours, I think."

"What did you do next?"

"What, after the girls? I always liked those girls, horny types. Yes. Well we retrained after a break, to Mossies. Lovely fast jobs Mosquitoes, huge 24 cylinder engines. Made of wood, you know [not the engines!] Flew like a dream!"

"Where to?"

"We were called pathfinders. We would fly out in advance of a bomber stream and drop flares to mark the aiming points. Of course the Junker's'd be waiting for us. I swear I saw the faces of pilots I'd a tried to kill in Beaufighters, trying to kill me."

He stopped for a moment.

"But *they* didn't get me."

"Oh, yes?"

"Had some hairy flying. Did three hundred hours on Mossies. I'll always remember one navigator who was always pissed as a newt. Like me." He laughed.

"Go on!"

"Pilots and navvies usually attended the same briefings on pathfinder jobs. That evening I noticed that Charlie was a little bit limp, but anyway, I had lots to do because the starboard engine had been replaced and I wanted to check my new toy, so I went to talk to the artificers, and only saw him as we assembled on the hard standing.