



THE WORLD, THE WORLD

MEMOIRS OF A LEGENDARY TRAVELER

NORMAN LEWIS



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Norman Lewis



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Chapter One

ALTHOUGH IT WAS YEARS before I realised this had happened, the direction of my life changed in 1931 with the sudden appearance of a breathless young Englishman who dropped into the dining-car seat facing me on an Italian train. I was to learn that he had missed the earlier express he had intended to take, and had only caught this by the skin of his teeth. The seat he now occupied, moreover, had been the only one left vacant. Fortune had committed us inexorably to each other's company on our journey to Rome. Later a shared sense of victimisation drew us even closer together and we exchanged smiles of exasperation when a flustered waiter dumped before us plates of food we had not ordered. By the time the spaghetti came he was telling me about himself. His name was Oliver Myers and he was an archaeologist on his way back from a two-year dig in the Egyptian desert. This explained the deep tan and the slightly faded quality of the blue eyes exposed over long periods to the sun. Now came the coincidence that we should both be re-emerging from the Islamic scene, for I was homeward bound from the Middle East where with two companions I had spent three months exploring the coasts of Southern Arabia.

Studying Myers I was forced to admit that, by comparison with his experiences, mine had been superficial. Apart from his dark skin and pale eyes, I noticed the cramped way four fingers were gathered to hold his fork, as if he had become accustomed to eat with his hand. I had confronted the almost impossible task of learning enough Arabic to get by. Myers spoke it fluently, although it was Arabic of the kind picked up in the course of working with illiterate fellahin. We both tried what we had to offer on each other, but there were vast areas of incomprehension. Myers was somewhat theatrical and the stream of debased Arabic was accompanied by a repertoire of arm-waving and facial contortions, many seeming to reflect the shrewdness, the cunning and the fear of the browbeaten peasantry from whom he had learned them. He seemed proud of the two years he had spent sunk deeply in the primitive world, drawing my attention to a gap where a tooth that had troubled him had recently been knocked out by a hammer. Half a forefinger had gone—crushed under falling masonry. However, even the sharing of interest in a language can provide a little of the social cement with which human relationships are bound together. By the time the cheese was served we were firm friends, and it was a friendship that lasted thirty years, terminating only with Oliver's death.

Coincidentally, we both lived in Bloomsbury, only five minutes from each other, for at that time I stayed in 4, Gordon Street in the house of my Italian in-laws, while he had a flat almost round the corner in Woburn Square. He was back in London for the publication of a tremendous tome of which he was co-author with Sir Robert Mond. It was called *Cemeteries of Armant*, and was just about to be issued by the Egypt Exploration Society.

Gordon Street was a calm Bloomsbury precinct a good mile from the periphery of Soho, and had

that distance from the small settlements of foreigners, largely Italian or Greek, scattered like iron filings round the magnet of Tottenham Court Road. It was largely peopled by those having connections with London University, academics who may have observed with surprise the process by which over a few years a variety of foreigners had crammed themselves into Number Four to produce a singular community. It was probably by pure accident that Ernesto Corvaja had chosen to buy a house in this locality. He and his wife, Maria, and their first child, Ernestine, had arrived some twenty-odd years before this from Sicily via the United States. The Corvajias were from the neighbourhood of Palermo in which people who work in the country return to the town after sunset and town houses—at least in Ernesto's day—had become little fortresses stuffed with near and distant relations and friends. The original Corvaja family was soon joined in London by Maria's brother Franco, his wife and son, and as the years passed there were visits by school friends of the children who often stayed on. By the late thirties my brother-in-law Eugene and two young artists had set up a colony in the principal room. An Eurasian girlfriend of Ernestine who had arrived two years previously was still on the scene, as was Maria Pia, Ernestine's former schoolmistress from Santandrea in Spain, who showed no signs of wishing to move on. In the meanwhile, Ruth, the Eurasian, had acquired an elderly German lover, whose duelling scars from the Heidelberg days were so numerous and deep that he had some difficulty in varying his expression.

Ernestina and Oliver took to each other immediately, and I was happy that this was the case. Our marriage had been, perhaps, not quite a love match but an arrangement we thought of as a partnership of similar minds. At this time Ernestina appeared to have decided to free herself from the claustrophobia so often accompanying the protection of the Latin extended family. By contrast, Oliver found relief in a refuge from the narrow experience of life in the outer suburbs of London.

The Corvajias, then, were extremely gregarious. They were also fond of animals. They possessed a large aggressive and smelly mongrel dog, a large somnolent cat reduced by a diet of pickled mushrooms and tagliatelli con vongoli to a state of chronic incontinence, and a little owl (*Athene noctua vidua*) imported from Brescia and chained to a perch in the dining room from which it surveyed the scene with imperturbable golden eyes. A kestrel, also imported from Italy, was kept in a separate room perching usually on the head of a fairish copy of Donatello's *David*. Both these birds were sensibly fed on day-old chicks supplied by a pet-shop, which they devoured in a lackadaisical fashion, with little evidence of appetite. The basement was the territory of Maria's cockerels reared by her since infancy without access to daylight, on legs sometimes almost doubled over by rickets. Despite their disablement they launched fierce, staggering attacks on all who approached them. 'If burglars break in they will react,' Maria said. 'They are part of our defence.'

It was an environment made to measure for Myers. The house next door but one had something to do with the University Senate, and wandering academics in search of this building regularly rang the

doorbell at Number Four in error. This was far from causing Ernesto displeasure. The burden of hospitality lay upon such Sicilians of the old school like a religious obligation. Ernesto ordered the maid to show all such strays into the front room where they would be offered a glass of blackish Sicilian wine before being redirected. This was the Mediterranean ceremony that so enchanted Oliver Myers when he first called to see me. I witnessed his enthusiasm displayed with the usual exaggeration, as he went through the inevitable wine-tasting, lip-smacking farce while Ernesto, troubled by the knowledge that the shipment had travelled badly and tasted like fountain-pen ink, looked on with his huge impassivity, doing his best to offer a smile of welcome but producing more than a mirthless writhing of the lips.

For Oliver it was an evening of fulfilment. Conversation at the dinner table was in French, Spanish and Italian and he listened happily to the polyglot chatter, coped well enough with the French and threw in the standard Arabic interjections which were quite obviously in praise of the food and accepted as such. The ill-travelled Sicilian wine had been replaced by Orvieto Classico.

‘Very generous, isn’t he?’ Oliver said to me later. ‘What’s he do for a living?’

‘He’s a professional gambler,’ I told him.

Oliver, too, was generous to an extraordinary degree, losing no opportunity to thrust gifts upon a friend, or even a casual acquaintance. Sometimes these were inappropriate. On the next occasion of his visit to the Corvajas he presented Ernesto with a carved ivory pipe from Aswan. Ernesto did not smoke.

For my birthday that year Oliver presented me with *Cemeteries of Armant*, his work of prodigious scholarship following two years of labour in the field. The results of this vast undertaking, to which forty-six authorities in various fields had contributed, seemed to have evoked symptoms of disappointment. Myers’ preface sets the mood in its opening sentence: ‘The cream has been skimmed off Egyptology, and the bulk of the information on the register is of no interest whatever to the ordinary reader.’ Later we are told that most of the sites investigated had been ‘nearly completely destroyed’ by robbers. Nothing of exceptional value to the museums was found in any grave. Among the ‘interesting material’ the robbers had not bothered to carry off were two beads showing pre-dynastic influence in their glazing. There were several thousand items of lesser interest, but the authors clearly accepted that this was not the stuff to make the reader’s pulse beat faster.

The fact was that by this time Egyptology had fallen under the shadow of Tutankhamon, and from the year 1922 that saw the opening up of his tomb and the recovery of the unrepeatably magnificent treasure it contained, Egyptology began to fall into decline. It was in a discussion of this melancholic topic that an unusual aspect of Oliver’s personality, of which I had already some inkling, became more clearly defined.

The popular press had moved on from their fulsome coverage of the original treasure hunt and its glittering climax and now began to report on the fact that within months of opening the tomb sever

members of Lord Carnarvon's expedition had died 'in mysterious circumstances'. Next, Carnarvon himself had succumbed, reportedly of a mosquito bite that turned septic, to be followed by his wife by pneumonia. With that, all the talk was of Tutenkhamon's curse, said to have originated in a monitoring inscription at the entrance to the tomb. It was a story that could have been lifted from the plot of one of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes thrillers, popular at that time, yet when I asked Myers how he felt about the Pharaoh's curse, I was staggered to discover that, in all seriousness, he was keeping an open mind.

Oliver occupied himself at the British Museum and by lecturing at the University. The Arman expedition had furnished a huge number of varieties of mummy, both human and animal. The rarest remained those dating from the Old Kingdom and continued to be much sought after. Consequently Myers found himself on the periphery, as a spectator, of a scandalous affair in which the Museum was said to have been induced to pay a record sum for what was described as a unique Old Kingdom mummy. Myers and his intimates who had worked at Arman and elsewhere believed that this spectacular acquisition was in reality the brother of the Cairo antique dealer by whom the mummy was procured, who had mysteriously disappeared as soon as the order was placed. Eventually rumours were closed, it was agreed that the man so wonderfully encased in ancient wrappers, although the contours of his features could be made out, had died in the distant past, and despite the misgivings of certain experts the mummy remained a centre of attraction at the museum for many years.

The fateful year of 1938 was upon us. It was the year of the peace at all costs at Munich, of a deep disillusionment and the feeling—instinctive rather than intellectual—that this country was under a growing threat of war. Ernestina's brother Eugene had gone off to join in the Spanish Civil War on the Republican side. A subtle change in the national atmosphere hinted at storms to come, and curious behavioural symptoms began to manifest themselves. *The Times* suddenly noticed that the membership of miniature rifle clubs had doubled in a year. I responded to this mood by taking a crash course in German, and was soon able to increase my income by translating sensational and pugnacious articles from the German press for publication in English newspapers.

Those were the days of the last fading flush of autumnal light over literary Bloomsbury, the bohemianism of the Fitzroy Tavern, the lectures on sexual emancipation at the Conway Hall, Bertrand Russell and Dr Joad's pleasurable reshapings of London bourgeois life. Myers and I met often and grew to know each other better. He refused to eat anywhere except at Prada's restaurant in the Euston Road where charming Italian waitresses, all born in London, forced themselves to speak broken Italian to such obvious cosmopolitans as my friend. Despite his flamboyant manner (embarrassing to many Italians) and banter and confident gallantries in the presence of girls such as these, Myers belonged to that category of men like Scott Fitzgerald who are prone to whisper to a friend their doubts over the size of their penis. I suspected that some such lurking fear had promoted his friendship with

showgirl from the Windmill, a practically speechless little Siamese with two-inch fingernails who tottered into view from the wings in support of any of the theatre's frequent oriental settings.

The only occasion, he told me, on which he had felt obliged to break faith with Prada's had been when he invited this lady to dinner. Having learned with delight that she preferred to eat with her fingers, he had scoured London and finally heard of an Indian restaurant in Charlotte Street where it was reputed this could be done. It turned out that by the time of their visit the place had changed hands. A number of the diners wore black ties, and when Myers explained what was proposed, the owner showed hesitation and finally led them doubtfully to a table in an alcove at the back of the restaurant, where nevertheless they remained objects of curiosity.

Emblazoned as his personality was with eccentricity, Myers was able to make himself liked by all who knew him well. He became a frequent and welcome visitor to Gordon Street where Maria had instantly been won over by the hyperbole lavished on her cooking, Eugene listened entranced by stories of armed conflict with Egyptian tomb-robbers, Ernestina teasingly corrected woebegone attempts at Italian, and Ernesto, expressionless as a death-mask, watched as he might have some performing animal.

In the spring Myers was obliged to return to the Middle East, and his contribution to the household social hubbub was missed. It was to be a year of disruption in the Corvaja household. Ernestine's Eurasian friend and her German lover pulled out, and the uncle who had become an alcoholic was taken to the French Hospital in Shaftesbury Avenue, where as soon as he was left on his own he committed suicide by jumping from the nearest window.

Perhaps these upsets fostered Ernestine's sudden desire to go to Cuba. The Corvajas were a family of Spanish origin who had settled in Sicily in the seventeenth century while it still remained part of the Spanish kingdom and its ancestral links remained sufficiently strong for Ernestina to have been sent for part of her education to the Colegio Rodriguez in Santander. In culture and temperament she was incurably Latin.

The latest news from Spain was of the inevitability of Franco's victory, and without waiting for this to happen a Spanish family with whom she had spent short holidays had fled to Cuba. They now wrote begging her insistently to visit them, and this she wished to do. She was at this time having treatment for nervous tension, and her doctor thought it a good idea. 'It's something that's turned into a bit of an obsession,' he said. 'Awful place. We used to call there when I was a ship's doctor. Probably seen the film *Weekend in Havana*, but it isn't like that. Stinking hole. Might get it out of her system once she's seen it.'

This was the advice I followed, and we arrived in Havana in July 1939.

The doctor's picture of Havana was misleading indeed: it abounded with pleasure of the kind that London could not supply. It was an anarchy of colour, for rather than jettison unfinished cans of paint

people splashed what was left on the nearest wall. The city resounded with cheerful noise, of street corner boys tapping drums, tramcars flashing and showering sparks from overhead contacts, the whir of fruit juice mixers, and the chatter of one or two of the thousand canaries the dictator Batista had recently released. It smelt of electricity and cigar-smoke, and in places of overburdened drains. There was a leisure not to be found elsewhere, with twenty-five men enthroned in a row to have their shoes polished for the third or fourth time in that day. At nine every morning a religious procession formed to study the numbers of the lottery tickets on offer as soon as they were put up on the stand. In Havana it was normal, as we ourselves found, to be stopped in the street by absolute strangers wishing to communicate their thoughts on anything that happened to have caught their attention. The mulatto girls of Havana were seen to flaunt the biggest posteriors and the narrowest waists in the world.

Havana exposed the newcomer to an overpowering vivacity, the street overflowing with beautiful bronze bodies, dressed as if part of the overflow of a carnival taking place round the next corner. The comfortable white minority, although less in evidence, were hyper-active with financial manoeuvrings, for everyone now believed that a world war was certain, and the international news after a previous slump in the sugar market, induced a happy frame of mind. It was accepted that neutral countries everywhere did well out of wars, and the first battles of the conflict to come were being fought on the stock market. The Havana sugar brokers sat up half the night at the Hotel Nacional drinking to Chamberlain's failed appeasement at Munich. Already the city was awash with money and with the news of the foreigners buying sugar for stockpiling at record prices. The *Diario de la Marina* published the first photograph of a happy speculator lighting a cigar with a fifty-dollar bill.

We stayed a few days in the small villa of Ernestina's friends the Molas, then moved to a run-down hotel. Havana was bursting at the seams and rooms were hard to find. The situation put an idea into Juan Mola's head. While teaching at Madrid University he had picked up left-wing ideas, and faced in consequence with the possibility of years of exile, he was obliged to look round for some way of earning a living in Cuba. It was clear that accommodation would always be scarce in Havana, and rents in this booming city went up with every week that passed. Only foreigners could now afford to stay in a decently run hotel. Why not, then, Mola said, kill two birds with one stone by opening one? Spacious old colonial-style houses could still be picked up cheaply enough out of town, and in the Niagara of speculative cash in search of investment, there would be little difficulty in buying one of these for conversion.

It was agreed that we might fit very well into this scheme of things. Eighty per cent of the customers for Havana's hotels were Americans, thus fluent English in the reception was essential. Juan and Gloria Mola and Ernestina were full of enthusiasm, I a little less so. Cuba attracted and stimulated me in every way, but I was alarmed at the prospect of burning my boats and settling down without a period of trial in a country of which I knew so little. The search for a suitable house for conversion was still in progress when the war broke out, and despite the general feeling in Havana that

it might be possible to turn one's back on what was happening on the other side of the world. something in the depth of my being whispered that the course of our lives was at the point of change.

The general view in Britain at this time, which the government made no attempt to play down, was that the country must be prepared for all-out attack both by the Luftwaffe and the submarines of the German Navy, and in response to a bombardment of requests for information and official counsel the embassy in Havana advised all British nationals able to do so to stay where they were until such protection could be provided from dangers they might encounter from submarine attacks. Once again, despite the experiences of the First World War, the enduring fallacy had survived that the war would be over by Christmas. Wars, according to ancient inherited memories, started when the harvests were safely gathered in and stopped when the first snow fell. Despite the size, strength and obvious determination of the two sides that now faced each other, more people could still find cause for hope that they might take up their normal lives again in a few months. Nevertheless I found myself temperamentally unable to stay in Havana as less than a spectator of world-shaking events. It was agreed that Ernestina should stay on, as recommended, at least until the spring, while I took the first ship passage I could find, arriving by an American cargo boat in Tilbury on 29 November.

To my delight I found that Oliver Myers was already home from Egypt, and had exciting news for me. The threatened all-out air attacks in London had not happened, and war at that moment was a matter of unlit streets, rationing for those unable to eat in restaurants, and a determination not to carry gas-masks whatever the threat of a surprise gas attack on the capital. Myers' news was that there was an urgent demand for speakers of Arabic. He had presented himself at the War Office where he was told to put what polish he could on his peasant Egyptian dialect, and in the meanwhile hold himself in readiness for some occupation of a special kind. My interview was with the same elderly and bookish lieutenant. He gave me a simple English sentence to translate, and I did what I could. 'Where did you learn your Arabic?' he asked, and I told him that I had picked it up in the Aden bazaar. 'Yes,' he said with a sort of gentle disdain, 'so I would have thought. And would you be prepared to tackle the considerable task of making it work for North Africa?' I said I would. 'In that case we'd better get you into the School of Oriental Studies,' he said. There might be months before my call-up, he thought, and so there were.

I took the school's course, and to fill in time crammed in a six-month course in Russian, but a year passed slowly before I was called for an interview in a Mayfair office. Although I could now cope with the Algerian alphabet's extra letter and its invention of a future tense (seen as irreligious in other parts of the Islamic world), the interviewer made no attempt to test my Arabic. Instead he studied with satisfaction my Celtic aquilinity of feature and dark eyes, asked me how I was as a swimmer, and glossed over the fact that I was bad. Had I ever done any amateur theatricals, and would I be happy about dressing up a bit? he wanted to know. I told him about a school play, and that seemed to satisfy him. 'The main thing is a sense of adventure,' he said, to which I nodded in agreement. They were not

ready to use me, he said, nor could he say when that was likely to be. In the meanwhile he wanted to enlist me in the Intelligence Corps, but to apply for deferred embodiment, just in case the waiting period was longer than he hoped and I might suffer the misfortune of being called up in the ordinary way. When I asked him what was the Corps' function, he told me that he knew that it existed, but more than that.

I enrolled in the Intelligence Corps, underwent four months of training with an infantry unit in Northern Ireland, then three months at the Corps depot at Winchester, where they specialised in ceremonial drills invented by Frederick the Great and taught recruits to ride motorcycles downhill after the brakes had been disconnected, with the result that one third of them went to hospital. The chance to dress up—I could only suppose as an Arab—and be deposited from a submarine on the Algerian shore, never came. It was a lucky escape indeed for a poor swimmer. Most certainly I would have drowned, for according to a newspaper report published in the last few years, the three or four volunteers committed to this adventure all died.

The last meeting with Oliver before the tides of war were to sweep us in different directions was inevitably, at Prada's restaurant. By the purest mischance it was on the night of the first so-called thousand-bomber raid on London. Bombs were falling everywhere on the city and we watched through a tiny peephole in the blackout while a fiery glow enlivened with golden sparks rose over the roof-tops across the road and the fire-engines jangling their bells went racing by. Mr Prada joined us, looking remarkably composed but convinced that his business was about to come to an end. In view of this he offered to sell us any bottle or bottles from his much-acclaimed collection of rare vintages for one pound apiece. We chose a Madeira in a long narrow bottle that he swore was from 1822 and an 1870 Chateau Yquem, drank them slowly and awaited with fatalism the decisions of destiny. When we staggered out it was to discover a new beauty revealed by fire in the normally dismal surroundings of Euston Road. We accepted that years might pass before we saw each other again, and this proved to be so. Oliver was off in a matter of days to some unknown destination in the Middle East, while in the same week I embarked with my Intelligence Corps section on the *Maloca*, bound for the invasion of North Africa.

Service with the Corps, always interesting and supplying occasional excitements, took me to Algeria, Tunisia, Italy, Austria and Iraq. In October 1944 I embarked on the most extraordinary of these experiences: escorting 3,000 unfortunate Russian prisoners back to the frontier of their homeland. Our ship, the *Reina del Pacifico*, stopped at Aden to take on fuel, and received a visit by two sergeants of the port security section, limp with the boredom of such desolate outposts of empire that is temporarily relieved even by the sight of a new face. In the course of an exchange of professional chat mention was made of an eccentric supremo named Myers in charge of the Aden defences. 'Red face, gap teeth, finger missing?' I asked, and was told that that was the man. 'Any chance you could see him and tell him I'm here?' I asked, and the sergeant, clearly astonished by such

a request, said he would try. The two went off, and within a matter of minutes a launch roared off from the shore and Oliver stepped aboard.

He hesitated by the taffrail, caught off guard by the inhibitions of the occasion. I had rarely seen a less military figure, certain that this was the only soldier wearing a solar topee and Sam Browne who could still contrive to look a bohemian. 'What on earth?' he said. 'What on earth?' The two Field Security sergeants who had come back with him brought a rope to exclude intrusion, and behind them Asiatic Russians prowled softly, as if over the black, spongy earth of the Siberian forest, and watched us with almond eyes. I explained what I was doing there. 'Supposed to be exceptionally ferocious, aren't they?' he said. 'Must say they don't look it. Do you have much contact with them?'

'Constant,' I said. 'They compose wonderful surrealistic poetry in Tadjik and the battalion commander translates it into Russian, after which I have a go at putting it into English.'

'What a marvellous experience. Tough soldiers and still poets. What do you put it down to?'

'They've managed in some way to retain the imagery of childhood. Their heads are full of fairy stories.'

'Well, I think that's marvellous. But what's likely to happen to them?'

'I think they'll be shot.'

'How unfortunate. I'd have loved to see one of your poetry sessions in action.'

'Well you can. All you have to do is say the word. They'll reel out poetry at the drop of a hat.'

'Unhappily you're leaving in a matter of minutes. Have to get you out of Aden as soon as we can. We've received a garbled signal about a possible attempt by persons travelling on this ship to go ashore. Well, I suppose it makes sense. It's a pity. I won't even have time to tell you about the afreet and the Arabian demons in the Lahej desert. See them any time you like. I'm in the middle of some tremendously exciting experiments.'

'But hasn't it all been explained away as something to do with luminous gas?'

'It's much, much more than that. I only wish we had the time to go into it in a properly detached and scientific way. This is an awful place but being here has at least helped to confirm my attitude, for example, to such things as E.S.P., for which I can only be thankful. I do hope we'll have more time together on your way back.'

There was a blast on the ship's siren, followed by shouts and the rattle of a heavy chain. The sergeants, blank-faced in their pressed shirts and white blanco, closed in, reminding me of sanatorium attendants about to take over a patient back from an outing. Myers was suddenly limp and forlorn against the great, grey slagheaps of the Aden background. Returning my salute it was almost to be foreseen that he should knock his topee slightly askew. '*Ma es salaam,*' he bleated softly as the party turned away.

Infantry soldiers of the accompanying guard rounded up the Tadjiks and took them below.

Senior Lieutenant Golik, the Russian Commander, discussed the prisoners' future and the entertainment the Asiatics were staging that night. There had been a last-minute decision that this particular batch of prisoners should be treated as allies, because there was proof that they had freed themselves from the Germans and actually fought them before surrendering to the British. Therefore at Port Said, in the midst of the voyage, they had been told to get out of their German uniforms, and had been issued British uniforms in replacement. The uniforms were joyfully accepted and even the subsidiary equipment such as zinc water bottles, mess cans, nail- and tooth-brushes and combs, for which a Tadjik would normally have little use, were ingeniously dismantled and turned into musical instruments. Miraculously, almost, the Tadjiks converted such items as gas capes and camouflage netting into colourful and extravagant costumes and slyly filched ochre paint used to touch up the ship's bare metal, and with this decorated faces and bodies with fantastic designs. The three Russian officers did not understand the Tadjik theatre and were bored by it all. The Tadjiks impressed them in other ways, notably by their attitude to death. Golik explained: 'In our case life and death are very different things. We see them as entirely separate. With the Tadjiks this is not so. You may be chatting to one and he will say to you "Well, of course we are now talking about the time when I was alive." "So at this moment you think you're dead," I say to him, and he tells me, "Yes, and you're dead, too." The Germans put 100,000 of them in the camp at Salsk and provided food for only 10,000 so they ate each other and put it into their poetry about their adventures in the demon land.'

'Did you eat human flesh, lieutenant?' I interrupted him. 'Only cannibals survived,' he said. There was a Tadjik stretched out on the deck nearby and Golik called him over to show me the hole in his thigh. 'This one had a fever and didn't know what they were doing to him. We had no knives at Salsk but there were men who grew thumb-nails like daggers and they used them to scoop the flesh out. The Tadjiks were the best fighters we had. They were never sure whether or not they were dead and that made the difference.'

I was down in the hold every night with the Russians, trying to write down the poetry, and watching the Tadjiks act out their dreams. In addition to the British Army issue of kit they had managed to scrounge all kinds of useful litter from the crew and these they turned into antique-looking fiddles, lutes, and rebecks which they played with an ear an inch from the strings to listen to the soft resonance, inaudible to outsiders, of the music of the other world.

Ten days later at Khorramshahr all this came to an end. The ship tied up under the soft rain and looked down on the glum prospect of a marshalling yard in which, synchronised as a piece of theatre with the dropping of the anchor, an extraordinary train came puffing into view. This, drawn by three pigmy engines, was composed of an endless succession of miniature cattle trucks of the kind the Russians use to transport pigs. It stopped when level with us and instantly a column of Russian green-coated infantry came into sight, halted, then deployed to form a line between the ship and the train. This was the moment for the prisoners and their British infantry escort to disembark. Two of the 200

odd soldiers of the British infantry escort faced two long ranks of Soviet troops in between which we ushered the returning prisoners. There followed prolonged shouting of orders, the stamping of boots and slapping of rifle-butts as both British and Russians performed ceremonial drill movements appropriate to the occasion. The OC Troops and the Soviet commander then strutted to meet each other, saluted and shook hands, and the documents formalising the handover were exchanged and the thing was at an end. Or almost. As explained later by one of the Soviet interpreters, such was the Soviet commander's distaste for the returning Russians that he refused to speak to them even to give the order to entrain. He asked a representative to talk to me. This man, wearing a commissar's star, was exceedingly overbearing in his manner. 'Comrade Interpreter,' he said. 'Kindly tell these pigs to entrain.'

'Tell them yourself, Comrade Commissar,' I said, and turning, I walked away.

On its return to Port Said a few weeks later, the *Reina del Pacifico* failed to stop at Aden as announced and it was two years before I saw Myers again, immediately after our demobilisation in 1946. We met at Gordon Street, where only the basement rooms were habitable, one of which I shared with a hundred or so old motor tyres. In those days of shortages, Eugene had found there was a brisk demand for these.

About one third of the west side of the street had been demolished with much loss of life by a parachute bomb dropped in the last night of the big air attacks. On the east side, including Number Four, some mysterious phenomenon of this blast had spared the façades of the houses while virtually ripping out many of the interiors. Partition walls crumpled, all windows and most doors were blown out, staircases collapsed. There were freaks of almost impish destruction; a flying missile wrecked a valuable picture in a room otherwise intact, while oil dropped on the tapestry seat of a single chair.

Oliver had been hardly recognisable as a soldier in Aden. Now, in a rumpled jacket and black hair, he had turned into a Bloomsbury regular of old, although Bloomsbury as he had known it had disappeared.

'I've got something for you,' he said, and I found myself holding a small articulated fish, possibly of silver. 'It's a fertility charm, worn during intercourse to ensure pregnancy by the tribal women of Lahej.' His last present to me had been a moose horn, and now I was ready for him with an enormous collection of philosophical works for which I had paid £1 in Charing Cross Road.

I made hazelnut coffee over a primus while Myers untied the parcel.

'Where are the Corvajas these days?'

'They found a cottage in Kent,' I said.

'And those wonderful copies of the Sistine Chapel ceiling he was working on?'

I had almost forgotten. Ernesto was no original painter, but a superb copyist. He had arranged for expensive reproductions on a reduced scale of the Sistine paintings to be sent from Italy, and had

spent two or three years using the paintings made from them to enrich the ceilings of his best rooms.

‘What happened to them?’ Myers asked.

‘They fell down. Like everything else they returned to dust,’ I said. ‘There are a few chunks lying about the place somewhere, if you’d like a souvenir.’

He had finished unwrapping his gift and took out the first volume, turning over the pages with obvious delight. ‘I say, this is rather exciting,’ he said. ‘What do you think of it yourself?’

‘It’s tosh,’ I said.

Myers shook his head sadly. ‘Oh well.’

‘Still investigating E.S.P.?’ I asked him.

‘I keep an open mind in these matters as you know,’ he said. ‘And now we’re on the subject, wonder if you’d object to helping me with an experiment I’ve always wanted to do?’

‘Not necessarily,’ I said. ‘So long as it’s not absurd.’ He expected me to talk to him in this way and gave a good-humoured laugh.

‘It would mean a trip down to Stonehenge,’ he said.

‘I’ve always wanted to see it.’

‘The question is how would we get there? Half the trains don’t seem to be running.’

‘I managed to get hold of a car last week, so there’s no problem.’

The car was a baby Fiat. There was an old airship hangar in a field at Isleworth full of cars that had lost their owners or been repossessed, all selling at £100, whatever the make, model or age. There was a Mercedes SSK that had cost £3,000 but the baby Fiat did fifty to the gallon and 200 miles worth of black market petrol coupons bought from farmers went with the car. ‘Fine day and empty roads,’ I said. ‘Let’s make it tomorrow.’

The night in early April had dusted the fields with frost, and there were still patches of mist, and still little clouds in an otherwise clear sky leap-frogged over the hills. We’d come down through Basingstoke and a dozen small towns and the first building of Andover showed over the grass.

‘Quiet, isn’t it?’ Myers said.

‘Bound to be,’ I said, ‘with half the people still away.’ The main road was empty apart from a few sad farmcarts. In some places they had started repairs and there were ropes across the road and diversions into lanes. In these, hedges that hadn’t been cut back for six years threw down trailers and brambles that clawed at the small bonnet of the Fiat as it poked its way through. England, this April was an everlasting Sunday morning, lying under a spell of emptiness and silence. Six lost summers these small towns had done away with colour, leaving faded paintwork and the tatters of advertisements posted on hoardings before September 1939.

In Andover we stopped for late breakfast in a hotel that had been re-opened only a week before. They were still scratching flies’ wings out of the wood-work in the dining-room. A girl with her face

whitened like a geisha's brought us the rare treat of a boiled egg apiece. Pasty as she was, she still had plenty of flesh on her bones. Londoners these days looked like Romans with high cheek-bones and aquiline noses. Somehow the emptiness and boredom of the years of listening to the distant noises of war had fattened these people. We finished our eggs and the girl was back to offer us two more, which we declined. There was coffee, too, which she warned us was made from toasted nuts, and this, too, we turned down.

'So when are you off to see Ernestina?' Myers asked.

'Monday week,' I told him. 'I'm still on the wait-list for Guatemala City, so I'm living in hope.'

'What made her go there when she took such a liking to Cuba?'

'The cost of living in Cuba went through the ceiling, and only fairly small sums could be sent out from England. She made Guatemalan friends who were going back and they took her with them.'

'Six years is a long time,' Myers said.

'It can be very long,' I said,

Stonehenge was a half-hour further into the morning, a tightly packed megalith cluster throwing down long spears of shadow over the yellow sapless turf. There were pigeons on the stones and many in the sky above, but nothing else in sight that moved.

'Worth the journey?' Myers asked.

'Of course,' I said. 'Rather smaller than I thought.'

'But very impressive.'

'Even after Karnac?' I said.

'Yes,' he said. 'The feeling I have is that it's older. And ... how can I put it? More universal. This is not a monument for a cat god, but the sun and the universe.'

'Should have been ravens and crows. Not pigeons.'

'Pigeons are doves. Remember that. They're just as symbolical. I wonder if you feel moved by the grandeur of these surroundings in the way I do.'

'There's no way of knowing. Probably,' I said.

'Atmosphere and mood enter very strongly into the kind of experiments that interest me. I've been investigating telepathy in a friend's flat in Highbury, but so far I must admit without positive conclusions.'

'The conditions were wrong,' I suggested.

'Well, yes, they were. Every few minutes a tube rumbled past somewhere beneath us in the bowels of the earth. Intensive concentration was impossible.'

I was studying the monument and thinking about it. Apart from the various cosmic purposes ascribed to it, I seemed to be in the presence of something reflecting the mind of a young child that seeks to challenge nature by unnatural re-arrangements of objects that come to hand, by precarious feats of balancing, as in the case of the colossal lintels here on the standing stones. It was a child's

impulse carried to extremes.

We had reached the central feature known as the Middle Archway, a compound of four uprights supporting three massive lintels. ‘What I’d like you to do is to place yourself against the end stone with your back to it,’ Oliver said. ‘I shall then go to the stone at the far end, which I imagine is about twenty yards away. You will transmit thoughts and I will receive. It is now twenty past ten and we’ll start in exactly five minutes’ time. You could visualise a well-known scene, or select some episode of your experience and think about it with every ounce of concentration you can put into it. What is essential is the exclusion for, say, three minutes of all random thoughts. We’ll repeat the experiment four or five times then if you can possibly muster up the patience to cope I’d like to go over it a few times with me on the transmitting end.’

He went off and I stood against the stone, still wet from frost in the feeble rays of the sun, and did what I could to enter into the spirit of the thing by starting to concentrate. Shortly he was back, smiling and confident. ‘Perfect conditions,’ he said. ‘Couldn’t have been better. Can’t help thinking you went out of your way to make things easy for me. Simple stuff. You were thinking of nude women with fair hair.’

‘Wrong,’ I said. ‘I was thinking of an item in yesterday’s *Telegraph* about a bear holding up the traffic on a Spanish main road.’

‘Oh hum,’ he said, suddenly crestfallen. ‘Hold on, though. Wait a minute. Nude—bear—bar— Surely that’s a possibility? Or don’t you think so?’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Well, I’m not at all sure. I find it encouraging. Perhaps you’re just tired. Anyway, we’ll have another go tomorrow.’

Chapter Two

LETTERS FROM ERNESTINA HAD arrived regularly while I remained in England. They were cheerful and interesting and described life in a Central American republic with such inspired powers of description that friends like Myers urged me to keep them carefully with a view perhaps to eventual publication. Ernestina had persuaded her to follow the recommendation issued through the Embassy to remain in Cuba after the outbreak of war, and she accepted that it was prudent and reasonable to put aside any thoughts of return while the blitz continued, especially after bomb damage left the Corvaja home in Gordon Street virtually uninhabitable. Thereafter I was sent overseas and so long as Ernestina could support herself in Cuba, or subsequently Guatemala, there seemed little point in her returning to England. Few letters arrived from that time on, and in the period from 1943 to the end of 1944, all news ceased for a period of five months, to be followed by a silence of seven months. This was not an unusual experience, for with changes of sections and theatres of war correspondence was hugely delayed and some letters never delivered. I attempted to break the silence through our Florida section which had some connection in Central America, but their news seemed wary and non-committal: Ernestina had been contacted and was alive and well; no more than that.

Non-military planes flying in any direction continued to be rare for months after the war's end and Britishers stranded anywhere in the Americas were warned to expect long delays before repatriation. Flights in the other direction were less heavily booked and I wrote to say that I expected to be able to come to Guatemala in a matter of weeks. This produced a rapid and enthusiastic response, but somehow I sensed a lack of spontaneity in the writing. It was a long letter that seemed almost too literary, too well-written, too full of nicely turned phrases. I could discover in these sentences no evidence of joy.

The flight to Guatemala was confirmed within a week of the trip to Stonehenge. Ernestina met me at the airport and for a moment I had difficulty in picking her out in the crowd waiting at the barrier. She was smaller than she had always appeared in my memory, the six years had reshaped her face in such a way that she might have been a sister or a cousin, and her stiff, nervous smile probably matched my own. This, I was compelled to admit, was a stranger. Over six years the letters we had written each other had been conventionally informative and cheerful. We had acted as our own censors, but as I well knew the professionals with their scissors left little but banal scraps so that too often not even our literary links had survived.

A standard defence in such emergencies as this is to keep talking. Everything personal was skirted round, and even any description of the fate of the Corvaja family still sitting in the ruins of their house drew little response. So many of us in Europe had settled to a uniformity of crisis. My last experience of life in a foreign land had been Cologne shortly after its near-obliteration in the fire

storm raid when I had watched the flies stream in and out of the holes in the ground. Here Guatemala City there was an unchallenged normality and stress was unknown. We dined in a restaurant where barefoot Indian girls brought tray after tray of food: ham, tortillas, cheese, dishes of black beans with chillies, joints of grilled guinea pig, meat impaled on little skewers and overflowing baskets of tropical fruit. At one point Ernestina called over the girl who had served her, took a boiled sweet from her handbag, unwrapped it and gave it to her. When she spoke to the girl, who could have been in her twenties, she spoke as if to a young child. 'Of course they are children,' she said, clearly intercepting my thought. 'The hotel doesn't allow tipping so we like to give them sweets instead.'

I commented on the interesting ethnic design woven into the serving girl's garments, all of which I had noticed were different. Immediately Ernestine's expression took on life. It was a welcome distraction, and we were both on safe ground.

'Every girl is obliged to wear real tribal dress,' she said. 'It's a tourist attraction. The huipils you see here belong to a dozen different tribes and a lot of people come here just to study them.' She was clearly well on her way to becoming an expert in such matters. I remembered now of mention made in a letter of part-time work for the National Museum. 'They hope to open a textiles department,' she had written, 'and I'm giving them a hand. Unfortunately it's already late in the day and many of the best designs have been lost.'

The view through the window was of the avenue, like a film set in colours from Eisenstein's *Thunder Over Mexico*. A policeman with an obsidian face stood at a street corner, and an Indian stumbled by on burdened legs. He wore a vermilion kilt and carried the first *cacaxte* I had seen, a wooden cage strapped to his back filled with cans of Coca-Cola. I commented on this and Ernestine said, 'You won't see many delivery vans. They put people out of work. That man keeps a family of thirty centavos a day, which is what he's paid. Five centavos of that goes to the policeman for allowing him to use the avenue, which cuts a mile or so off the walk.'

I said nothing. These were the abuses one expected of a banana republic, but the next small surprise came when the girl arrived to clear away breakfast. I had noticed with concern that the contents of an ashtray from a nearby table had been emptied on a plate of untouched food. 'What happens to all the perfectly edible leftovers?' I asked.

'It goes into a swill-can, and ultimately into the ravine.'

'God,' I said. 'All that food.'

'Sometimes the Indians get at it, but not often, the attitude being if they get free food why should they work?'

The people surrounding us messed with five meals a day, and I was keen to get away from them. I hired a car and we drove a few miles out of town. I wanted to get the feeling and the shape of the country. All the villages were crammed close to the ground which was the colour of burned brick, but as in Cuba, the people had taken pots of paint of whatever colour they could find and splashed it over

the walls. Of human activity there was little to be seen but the servitude of those struggling lives almost doubled under the terrible weight of their *cacaxtes*, the wild freedom of zigzagging drunks, and the teams at street corners hammering sad music from their marimbas. Eight volcanoes with menacing names like Fire and Water encircled the city and these paint-plastered suburbs, and the eight perfect cones floated in the soft light over this scene, with vultures like ash from a bonfire drifting hither and thither in the sky.

The theatricality of the surroundings seemed to do away with evasive talk.

‘I believe you enjoy life here,’ I said.

‘In a way, yes. I used not to and then I changed. At first I laughed at men who wore spurs even though they didn’t ride horses. Now I accept it as the normal thing.’

‘It’s a better life than in England, then?’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘As you remember England, of course?’

‘Naturally.’

‘You can’t imagine how much better you’d find it now. Do you want to come back?’

‘Let’s come into the open, Guatemala fashion, and be frank. I’m well occupied here. I do useful work at the Museum, and I have friends. This place is a citadel of privilege of the kind you’ve never known, but I’m used to it. I fit in. Do I want to spend the rest of my life here? I don’t know. The thing is I’m happy enough as things are, and it’s clear that you can manage without me. The only problem is money.’

‘It’s bound to be worse now the army pay remittances are at an end, and with the tightening up of sending cash abroad.’

‘Pity,’ she said. ‘The investment openings here will never be the same again. You can pick up a coffee finca for nothing. For the first time ever we have a liberal government which promises to give land to the Indians. All the finca owners are mad with terror.’

‘And what happens if the government takes your finca away and gives it to the Indians?’

‘They’d never do that to a foreigner. It’s out of the question.’

At that moment it seemed to me at least an interesting experiment, and even, possibly, a very exciting one.

Lazlo and Lena Papas, two Hungarian refugees who appeared to be Ernestina’s closest friends, had worked hard to enthruse her with the possibilities of this finca project. We called on them in the house which smelt faintly of goulash and looked out over what was commonly called El Mercado de los Zopilotes—the vulture market—in the lower end of the town. The Papas were merchants of hope who had left Budapest in haste some ten years before and lived here ever since by a series of schemes that had never brought prosperity but had somehow kept them afloat. They had taken the house in the market because nobody wanted it, and its windows overlooked Indians dressed in all the colours of the

rainbow, selling vegetables, and the *zopilotes* that had been there since the days of the Maya, and were so audacious that they would come flapping down to snatch some edible scrap from the bag carried by a shopper.

Being compelled to live among Indians as he did, Lazlo set out to extract profit from it and advertised himself as an expert on Guatemalan textiles, eventually becoming probably the only non-Indian, I learned, to be able to interpret most of the symbols woven into Indian garments. These often recorded in compact form the wearer's tribal history, his or her age-group, profession, status in society and even sexual potency. This led to a badly paid Museum job. Once in a while Lazlo managed to buy a good example of disappearing textile art and sell it on to the Museum, but these days, he said, such windfalls had become rare indeed. Upper-class ladies had started to collect. When they went to market they took cheap, commercially produced blouses with them and, having spotted a fine *huipil*, would order the market-woman to take it off, and hand her the blouse and possibly five dollars in return. Nowadays Indian women who might have inherited such a *huipil* from a mother or grandmother, wore it inside out when going to market to avoid such compulsory sales.

The Papas knew all about the coffee business. Briefly, and for a pittance, Lazlo had been a government inspector of coffee estates, carrying out coffee control on crops for export, and was offered bribes for good reports and threatened with beatings for those in any way critical of the production. He produced samples of different grades for our admiration or contempt. The best buy for anyone wanting to go into the business was in the Altiplano, he said, where soil and climate contributed to the production of what was generally accepted as the finest coffee in the world. He knew of a small finca going in this choice area that was very cheap indeed, and had everything to recommend it, including relative freedom from earthquakes and proximity to the main Quetzaltenango highway. Labour costs, too, were possibly the lowest anywhere.

'So what's the snag?' Ernestina wanted to know. 'Why are they selling it?'

'There's a widow involved. A woman can't handle a finca on her own. There was some trouble with the Indians when Ubico was here, and he hanged a few. But now the liberals are in that's all cleared up.'

It would take a day or two, Lazlo said, to get in touch with the people in the Altiplano and arrange to have somebody show us round. I was eager to see the north-west of the country. All the Indians of Guatemala seemed extremely poor, and those of the Altiplano, Lazlo assured me, were the poorest of the lot. This in its sad fashion added to their interest for me, for poverty and isolation had helped to conserve their ancient traditions. The *traje*, as the traditional dress was called, was to be seen here in its purest form, according to Ernestine's observations, and many customs and ceremonies that had died out elsewhere with the improvement of communications still took place.

In the meanwhile I made the useful acquaintance of Julian Berridge, the ceramics curator at the Museum, which possessed a huge collection of Mayan artefacts. Most of these were ceramic objects

such as drinking vessels and images recovered from lakes Atitlan and Amatitlan into which they had been thrown as sacrifices to the gods. They all demonstrated workmanship of the most exquisite kind. The Museum's collection was the start of my interest in the pre-Colombian culture of Central America, and induced me to embark on a serious study of the subject, finally abandoned some years later after it became clear that its range was so vast that it could never be brought to completion.

It took twelve hours and three changes of bus to reach Santa Maria de la Sagrada Concepción in the Altiplano. The buses were labelled 'third category' and had seven-inch wide seats which were normally used only by Indians who were both small and ready to put up with a minimum of space. Third category buses had a deserved reputation for unreliability, too. In the absence of genuine spare parts during the war years, they had been kept on the road only by miracles of ingenuity performed by village blacksmiths. Lazlo and I were wedged in position among Indians returning to the north, almost all of them in traditional *traje* woven with the symbols that spoke of the history of their tribe. Some of these were brief: 'We came from the mountains, we lived by a lake,' others were venturesome, even challenging, 'Call us the horse people. Four children per horse.' Of the Spanish conquest and near obliteration nothing remained but the respect for this fecund and powerful animal. First the law then custom prevented an Indian from riding one, yet a kind of close mystical association drew Indians to horses, and successful pregnancies resulted even from the spectacle of horse copulation, so frequently illustrated in woven design.

In these poor Indian villages the people settled uncomplainingly, and without the distractions of hope, to the hard life. The bus stopped at a market to cool down. Porters bent under their *cacaxtles* trotted in to unload their baggage then refilled the vacant space with the stones piled there for this use. It was their belief that muscles should never be left idle. We climbed down to stretch our legs spreading a local silence among the Indian crowd who followed us with their eyes without turning their heads. Lazlo, who spoke Maya-Quiché, picked up an occasional *sotto voce* comment. The Indian's absence of facial expression, he said, concealed subtle thought processes and much wit.

The long drag up into the Altiplano ended abruptly in a bedraggled cluster of yellow shacks under a mountain scarred all over from the conflagrations of slash-and-burn cultivation. 'Ixta-huacan,' Lazlo said. 'Famous for Mexican smugglers and iguana baked in clay.' The driver put us down, turned back with a desperate squawk on his bulb horn, and went off. A tall, disappointed-looking ladino came out of the cantina accompanied by a child dragging a hawk with a broken wing on a length of string. The man cuffed the child softly away and approached to introduce himself as the agent charged by the widow with the sale of her finca. He walked with the suggestion of a swagger picked up from Western movies and in local style wore four silver rings on the fingers of each hand. He had picked up some English by working in a fish-freezing plant in Belize. The finca was six miles away, he said, and if we were ready he would drive us there. He ducked out of sight into a ruined shed, re-emerging a few

moments later at the wheel of a car—once an old Ford saloon, the top of which had been cut away to turn it into an open tourer. Harness bells had been strung round the edge of the body, and from these soon as we started off came a prolonged festive jingling that was out of place in these surroundings.

We bumped and slithered for an hour through the red dust before stopping outside a square windowless building with an entrance covered by torn sacking. We climbed down from the car and the Ladino pulled aside the sacking for us to pass through. I found myself in a yard of the kind to be seen anywhere in the East or the slums of a Mediterranean city. There, it would have housed odds and ends of machinery or household objects for which it was hoped that, sooner or later, some use could eventually be found: a car axle, an engine block half buried in litter, a ruined tyre, a chicken coop in need of repair. Here, poverty of a different kind possessed nothing surplus to immediate needs and nothing ever to be dumped and forgotten. A search for the purpose of this place recorded fire-wood stacked in a corner, a slab of stone with an iron ring in it, a ram's skull, and steps in a wall that led nowhere.

'Santa Maria de la Sagrada Concepción,' the ladino said, with a touch of pride and a flourish of his beaming hand.

'Where's the village?' I asked.

'This is village,' he said. 'All peoples living in same house.'

'Where are they now?'

'Now they are in the mountains looking for food. If you call them to work and give them food they will be glad.'

'Is this place run with child labour?' I asked Lazlo.

'It comes into it in most fincas. The planters always tell you it's the Indian system. At first the Indians find them light jobs to do round the house. And when they're a little older they're supposed to help collect food in the fields or woods. "Why should we worry?" they say. "It's the way the Indians do things."'

The ladino nodded his agreement. 'Young children very good for coffee picking,' he said. There was a pause between sentences while he organised the wording of what was to come with eyes raised as if for inspiration and the tip of his tongue, as bright as coral, appearing momentarily in the opening of the full, dark lips. 'You may beat them if they don't work fast,' he said, 'and their fathers will be pleased.'

'Don't take any notice of that,' Lazlo said. 'That's meant to impress you. Indian parents no more beat their children than ours do.'

'At what age do they start?' I asked.

'In the finca, normally at eight.'

'How do you feel about that?'

'I'm totally against it. If we manage to get something going my plans are to start some sort

reform in the hope it might spread.'

'Good,' I said. 'It's something we'd better discuss before we get much further.'

The ladino had sensed disapproval of the harsh disciplining of child workers.

'Coffee-picking not hard,' he said. 'They will kiss your hand if you say they may work for you.'

Back in Ixtahuacan we found there was no chance of getting to Guatemala City that day so there was no escaping the cantina's dormitory, which was clean and quiet enough although it had to be shared with two other travellers.

Before returning we discussed the events of the day in the bar over several tequilas which encouraged Lazlo's expression of altruistic views.

'My hope would be to start a movement,' Lazlo said. 'Many planters are reasonable and humane people. The Church might even give us its blessing. The word would get round. This could be the start of a big thing. What do you think?'

'I'm not convinced.'

'You mean you don't see yourself as a coffee planter?'

'Not at this moment'

'Is it the child-labour thing?'

'That's certainly part of it.'

'The first thing I would do would be to push up the minimum age,' Lazlo said.

'To what?'

'Say, ten.'

'Two years one way or another hardly count. It's still child labour.'

'And cut the working day to eight hours. To some extent we'd be falling in with government policy. There was a reference to labour abuses in the President's inaugural speech.'

'Julian Berridge mentioned it the other day. He said that nothing would be done.'

'You have to remember this is the first liberal president this country has ever had.'

'As soon as he does anything to scare the hard-liners they'll get rid of him. Berridge gives the liberals three years. Let's suppose you manage to start the ball rolling with your one-man land reform and get yourself known as a liberal supporter, what's going to happen to you when the liberals are no more? The answer is you'll be wiped out.'

'Whatever Berridge thinks I don't feel like giving up,' Lazlo said. He drained his glass and in a local style sprinkled salt in his palm and licked it off. 'If necessary I'm ready to take a chance on my own. The time has come when I feel I have to do something with my life.'

At that moment a tall, elderly man advanced on us, stooping a little as he came through the doorway. I was struck by the fact that he was wearing an ill-fitting tropical suit of the kind rarely to be seen in Guatemala where members of the white upper-class—as this man clearly was—are careful about their appearance. He smiled through a ragged moustache in the process of going grey, and he

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