

# The Romanian Question

Michael Moorcock

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## DREAMS TO REMEMBER

All that day the train travelled at high speed westwards, through Roumania. It did not stop, but slackened speed slightly as it passed through the larger towns *en route*. Only the higher officials of the Roumanian main railway line knew of the passage of the special, heavily-screened train, its destination or its passengers. Towards midnight, the Yugoslav frontier lay only a few miles ahead. As the lights of Timisoara, capital city of Banat, the rich wheat province of Western Roumania, began to glow through the darkness, the driver sounded the engine whistle to warn the station of his approach. The train slowed down to pass through. Just as it left the station platform and was again gathering speed, sharp flashes and the staccato cracks of rifle fire burst from the thick undergrowth of the steep embankments by the side of the railway track. Bullets spattered sharply against the steel framework of the carriages and crackled against the reinforced glass of the windows. The driver quickly accelerated and the train shot forward at full speed towards Yugoslavia - and safety. The would-be assassins, it was discovered later, were members of the Iron Guard, the Fascist terrorists of Roumania who, at the behest of Adolf Hitler, had brought about the downfall of King Carol, brought his realm to ruin and degraded it to the level of a province of Nazi Germany.

*King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu,*  
A.L. Easterman, 1942

MOURNING THE EXCESSIVE fantasies of an unhappy celibacy, Jerry

Cornelius split with some feeling from the Carpathian convent where, for the past few years, he had been holing up. Life looked to him as if it might just be worth living again. Eastern Europe was perking with a vengeance. Though it had to be said, some people were already waving goodbye to their first flush of Ruritanian innocence.

“My view of the matter, Mr C, is that we should’ve nuked the bastards where it hurts.” In middle age Shakey Mo Collier was growing to resemble the more disturbed aspects of Enoch Powell. His pedantry had a tenancy to increase as his enthusiasm faded, and Mo, Jerry thought, was nothing without his enthusiasms. He blew Mo a kiss for old time’s sake and climbed into his coat-of-many-colours, his leather check. It still had the smell of a hundred ancient battles, most of them lost. “Down these mean malls a man must shop.” He checked his credit the way he had once checked his heat. These were proving easy times for him. But he missed the resistance. Who had given him all this unearned power whilst he slept?

It was then that he realised he had dozed out a class war in which the class he had opposed, his adoptive own, had won back everything it had seemed to lose and now had no further ambition but to maintain its privileges with greater vigilance than last time. He was the unwilling beneficiary of this victory. He became confused, too sick to spend. He felt his old foxy instincts stirring. He grew wary. He grew shifty. He stepped back.

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## **I’M STILL LEAVING YOU**

What Jessica Douglas-Home observed as she touted the polling booths with her interpreter and driver was that only members of the Salvation Front were represented at the polling stations. Opposition members had everywhere been prevented from turning up. Opposition workers reported posters torn down and offices ransacked, even by the police. Opposition newspapers were mislaid or destroyed and despite a decree that campaign-ing must stop two days before the election, there was the last-minute distribution of a free newspaper publishing photographs of all the official candidates. “Every one from the Ceausescu era,” says Jessica sadly. “Simply a game of musical chairs.”

*Sunday Telegraph, 27 May 1990*

THE TIME MACHINE was a sphere of milky fluid attached to the front

lamp-holder of a Raleigh 'Royal Albert' Police Bicycle of the old, sturdy type, before all the corruption had been made public. Jerry hated the look and feel of the thing, but he needed to take a quick refresher in 1956, to see if some of the associations made sense. At the moment, as he wiped the Bucharest dust from his handle-bars and checked his watches, he was down-right terrified.

Was it just the threat of liberty which alarmed him, or was the world actually on the brink of unimaginable horror as, in his bones, he feared? He shuddered. Whatever they might say, he had never relished the worst. Especially when the best seemed so much more within his grasp.

Yet this was the dangerous time. It always was. "As power-holders lay down their arms, those who have known little power are quick to seek advantages." Prinz Lobkowitz bent to pump up the front tyre, his wispy grey hair falling over eyes in which humour sought to disguise the concern he felt. "And there is nothing to say they won't abuse that power as thoroughly as their predecessors down the centuries. It's the same in the Middle East. Most of these people have never experienced anything like the familiar democracy of the West. They have no faith in it. They have been supplied with myths which prove how degenerate and immoral it was. These are deeply conservative people. They worship their ignorance since that was all of their religion that was left to them. They defend their ignorance as others might defend a principle."

"Sometimes you don't sound a lot different from the party hacks." Jerry gave the front wheel an experimental bounce. "That's a lot better. Thanks."

Prinz Lobkowitz fitted the pump back on the frame. "They are all shades, I suppose."

Jerry got the bike into the proper rhythm and was gone before he could say goodbye. The pearly grey mist opened before him. It was good to be on the move again. He only hoped no-one had changed the old megaflow routes.

This would not be the best moment to be Lost in Time, though God knew, it looked as if the whole of England was now in that situation. He had never imagined a future as miserable as this. He had thought the Sex Pistols had meant something more than a trend in T-shirts. They had all been bought over by lifestyle magazines.

He gazed wonderingly back at this unbearable future and found

himself suddenly in a coffee-bar in Soho talking to some-one called Max, who waxed his moustache and wore a pointed beard, about Blind Jesse Fuller and Woody Guthrie. These were the years of private obsession, of small groups of enthusiasts never acknowledged by the common media, not even *Melody Maker* which was full of Duke Ellington and referred to Elvis only on the cartoon page. "This was before your enthusiasm became the common currency of the sixties," said a Shade, "and you thought you had achieved a better world. Then you sold it back to them for shares in Biba, Mary Quant and Ann Summers, just as they merged with the City."

"Humbug!" Jerry desperately attempted to disengage from a morality he thought he'd discarded years before. "I don't want any of this. Where's my mother?" She would understand. He had missed total immersion. When he was this aware of actuality, he tended to retreat in every complex way he knew. Time experienced at such relentlessly close quarters gave him the heeby-jeebies. He shivered. 1956 had been bad enough without this as well.

It was time to split again.

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## **I AIN'T DRUNK**

In the case of Roumania and King Carol, Goebbels had a superb opportunity to demonstrate his perverted talents. Ten years' experience as Hitler's supreme disseminator of calumny and hatred had made him master of every trick and twist of this iniquitous profession. Since he had made the science of Jew-baiting with the poison pen his specialty, he found no difficulty in applying his evil genius to the peculiar conditions prevailing in Roumania where, for many decades, the 'problem' of the Jews had been raised to a front rank political issue.

*King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

BUT THE SIXTIES and seventies made him cry. He couldn't stand the sense of loss. How had they all been persuaded to hand their keys back to their jailors?

Was freedom really so frightening?

Evidently a lot of Romanians thought so.

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## **BORN IN GEORGIA**

President Ion Iliescu pledged yesterday to keep Romania on the road to democracy and to end what he called the country's moral decay.

*Reuter/Majorca Daily Bulletin, 21 June 1990*

"DON'T TELL ME!" Jerry smiled at the air-stewardess as she laid her towel at the edge of the pool. He leaned his arms beside it and tried to drag his pale body higher from the water of Tooting Bee Baths. "You're psychic too!" Her answering sneer would have sunk the Bismarck. "I knew it!" Jerry was in a fairly insensitive mood that afternoon. "I like your taste in boob-tubes," got him reported to the life-guard and, "Come fly with me," thrown out of the pool area.

As he slouched off across Tooting Common, whistling to his horrible dog, he wondered if his grandma was home from work and maybe good for half-a-crown, or at least a bag of toffees (she did half-time at Rowntree's). He jumped further backward until he was comfortably unaware of his free movement through Time and was able to turn his attention from the stewardess, still baffled by his sixties' slang, to the toy-soldier shop back near St Leonard's Church in Streatham Hill, a few minutes walk up the main road and down towards the Common. He wanted to make sure his naval gun-team was still there. He'd given the man 9d a week for it and he was only another 1/6d away; but he couldn't be sure of anything any more. Was he creator or the created? This unlikely thought made him pop in to the quiet of the church and glare with some respect at the stained glass prophets whom he now completely confused with God. For him, God had become a plurality of saints and angels. He'd had Rudolf Steiner to thank for that. Jerry - or someone like him - grinned into the dusty shadows of the Anglican sacristy. There was nothing left to steal.

Jerry tipped his hat to the new generation and turned back to his toys.

Two more weeks and he could land a team on Forbidden Island. His sailors almost within his grasp and the summer sun melting the sweet tar of Streatham, he sauntered down towards Norbury and Jennings' second hand book shop where he planned to trade his wholesome volume of *The Captain* for a novel called *Monsieur Zenith* by Anthony Skene, his current literary favourite and inventor of Zenith the Albino, the smoothest crook that

ever smoked an opium cigarette. It was Jerry's ambition to smoke an opium cigarette as soon as possible. His elders by a year had already ventured Up Town to Soho and found it good.

Meanwhile, let some other Jerry carry West London for a while. He was settling down in the South. Here only Teddy Boys lay in wait for you with razors. Anything was better than Blenheim Crescent's mephitic presence ...

But thought is resurrection. He found himself struggling to force his mother back into non-existence. Mrs Cornelius was unperturbed. She, of all people, was bound to survive. There wasn't a holocaust made that could get her. "Why don'cher come 'ome, Jer?"

He gave up. With pouting reluctance he wheeled his big, heavy bike up the hill and down towards Elgin Crescent. He was back in Notting Dale, immediately post-Colin Wilson. His bid for some other, less melancholy, past had failed again. Somewhere, he heard his Shade saying, I was happy once.

These weren't the kind of losses he had expected.

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## MIDNIGHT DRIVE

As usual in the Nazi propaganda of subversion, Goebbels did not scruple about consistency in his scurrilities with regard to Madame Lupescu, the king's companion of twenty years. Some of his 'stories' represented her as the instrument of 'capitalist profit-mongers, concessionaires and exploiters', others contained plausible tales to show she was the agent of 'international Bolshevism'. Contradiction of this kind never worried the Minister of Propaganda and Enlightenment. Hitler had laid down, in *Mein Kampf*, his fundamental principle of good political tactics and propaganda - the bigger the lie, the more easy its acceptance, the more effective its result.

*King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

"EAT YER TEA, Jer. I'll be back in abart an 'ar." Mrs Cornelius settled her hat and contemplated benevolently the slices of bread and Marmite, the Mars bar she had laid out for her son. "There's some Tizer in ther

cupboard.”

With the air of a mother who had more than fulfilled her duty, she left for the *Blenheim Arms*.

Jerry took pleasure in his food. It was one of his favourite meals. The area door opened and he saw Old Sammy put his hesitant head into the room. “Wotcher, young ‘un. Ma in?”

“Pub,” said Jerry. “Can I come and watch your telly later, Sam?”

“Course you can, lad.” Old Sammy was grateful for anyone willing, for whatever reasons, to accept his affection.

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## **I BEG YOUR PARDON**

Speaking after his inauguration in Bucharest’s Atheneum concert hall, Iliescu was unapologetic about his government’s role in dealing with street protests last week, although he admitted there had been excesses.

*Reuter/Majorca Daily Bulletin, 21 June 1990*

THE MANNERS OF these people, with their casual discourtesies and easy racialism, soon made Jerry as uncomfortable with the 50s as he had been with the 80s. What had changed? He was getting fazed again, almost as bad as he had become by the early 60s. “Arse that way, elbow that,” he told himself ritualistically as he made his cautious progress - some lemming to its cliff - back to his Royal Albert.

He was experiencing a certain amount of deterioration. As he pedalled, the mist grew warm and began to stink, reminding him of the wartime factories of Newcastle, of heavy locomotives panting in the steely evening light; the only colour the vivid flames of furnaces and mills. He had no idea where he was.

“Time travel had for too long been a matter of instinct, its secrets the province of romantic bohemians and crazed ex-perimenters.” Bishop Beesley spoke from somewhere at the centre of his steam-driven orrery, from some unlearned future. “It’s high time we brought System and Intellect to the Question of Time.” He pronounced some reasonable imitation of what he guessed was the current mode. Or was it post-mode now?

Jerry was beginning to sense his bearings. Somewhere from the late 80s he heard a howl of terrible xenophobia as a thousand intellectuals turned their hatred on the Unavoidable Present and many thousands of Muslims expressed their anger with two hundred years of insult which they had previously pretended to themselves was only the province of the ignorant and ill-educated amongst their neighbours.

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## **I'D RATHER GO BLIND**

Next day it was announced that the government had decided to form a new 'Party of National Regeneration', a fusion of all political parties into one 'National Renaissance Front'. There was no specific abolition of the former political factions, but by clear and unmistakable inference, they ceased to exist. Henceforth, Roumania was to be a One Party State whose principal members were to be nominated and whose purpose was to be 'the Defence of the Fatherland'. The leader of the new Single Party was King Carol. Elections would be held, it was stated, but only candidates approved by the Single Party leaders and declaring allegiance to it, would be permitted to seek the votes of the electors ...

*King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

"ALL WE HAVE to remember now, Mr Cornelius, is that many of our new sister countries believe quite profoundly in the virtues of tyranny. To them the words 'freedom' and 'auto-nomy' are, on other lips but theirs, the ultimate obscenities. And as for a United Germany, God knows what this will mean to my constituents!"

Miss Brunner nervously adjusted her twinset and glanced at her watch. "I'm on such a tight schedule, these days." Reminded of that, she breathed a sigh of relief. All she knew was control. It so reduced one's anxieties.

Jerry scratched his stomach with a borrowed loofah. His fatigues were far too tight for him and if she wanted the truth, he'd cheerfully give it to her.

"I'm too old to be a revolutionary," he said. "I'm just trying to hang on to the gains we made. And that's why we had to act, Miss Brunner."

"You won't get far," she said. The movement of her hand to her



perfect auburn hair was a kind of spasm. "You're having trouble breathing as it is." Unconsciously she reached for her own pulse." And don't think I'm afraid of any hidden gin bottles or whatever it is you believe you have."

"I believe I have the killing-harmony, the power-without-fear, white-eyes!" His fingers twitching towards his needle-gun, Jerry uttered something like his old mindless grin. "What you people never allow for is just how short a distance you can push some of us before we stop going with the flow."

"You disgusting old hippy."

"I never was an old hippy, darling." And he plugged her with one neat shot to the cortex. "I was only reborn in the 90s." He gave his wizened hands a wipe and returned to the video he had been planning to watch before she interrupted him. It was *Cat Ballou*. He was desperately in need of a new role model, even if it had died in the meantime. Concentrating on the credits, he reached for his pipe and his rocky.

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## **COLD SNAP**

President Iliescu of Romania claimed yesterday that the police and parts of the army had been 'psychologically incapable' of putting down anti-government protests, which was why he was setting up a new riot-control force. An unrepentant Mr Ionescu accused Western governments of overlooking the difficulties provoked in the police and army by the traumatic experiences during the December revolution. He also disclosed that he was considering a formal request to Britain to train the controversial new force.

*The Times*, 25 June 1990

IT JUST MIGHT be Hampton Court, he thought, wheeling his bicycle out of the maze at night. The Tardis - or police box - put the date at around 1965, the year of his immaculate conception, when an empty winter had been filled with the warmth of very young children and an overwhelming sense of responsibility, to self and to them. Jerry now wondered if that hadn't been just before the depression set in. The times were a-changing and interpretations varied; he was all at sea.

Defeated again, he returned to Blenheim Crescent. It had been an age since he had cycled that far in the snow.

“Ere ‘e is!” His mum came to the door, her sleeves rolled up on her red forearms and a huge knife in her right hand. “A regular bad ef fin’ penny, ain’cher, Jer?”

“Appy Xmas, Jer, boy.” His brother Frank’s weaselly expression shifted between pacific leer and burning hatred. It was his common response to Jerry’s arrival. “Caff’s on ‘er way, she said.”

Jerry shivered. He was not sure he was emotionally ready for his sister’s manifestation. Yet it was too late to worry.

Obediently, he took his old place at the table.

“Now, Jer - isn’t this better than freedom?” Frank grinned across the turkey as their mother poised the knife, her sweat dripping from elbow to half-burned carcass, to mingle with her coarse gravy.

At last Jerry remembered what he had always loved in his sister and no longer felt afraid of her.

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## **OUR LOVE IS RUNNIN’ OUT**

The knife-sharp air bit painfully into my face when I stepped from the Orient Express at Bucharest in the early hours of New Year’s Day, 1938. The gloomy station, silent save for the shufflings of the few sleepy porters and the tired hissings of the engine, gave emphasis to the frigidity, as it were, of my entry into the Roumanian Capital. It was not a heartening beginning of my mission to investigate the real meaning of King Carol’s nomination of the fascist, anti-semitic government of Octavian Goga.

*King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

LYING ON THE artificial beach at Nova Palma Nova reading a Largetype edition of *The Prisoner of Zenda* and listening to Ivor Novello’s *Glamorous Night* on his Aiwa, Jerry congratulated himself: an earlier generation would have been reading *The Prisoner of Zenda* on a Blackpool or a Brighton beach. What Romania really needed at the moment was a decent Colonel Zapt. But then everything kept changing. Maybe Ruritania was no longer a viable model? The thought filled him with sadness. He looked up, expecting

to see the towers of Zenda fading before his eyes, but his horizon was filled with neon, with the magic names of a different age - Benny Hill, Peter Sellers and Max Bygraves; McDonald's and Wimpy.

This vision disturbed him. These days almost any vision disturbed him.

Some sixth sense warning him, he looked up. Una Persson was tramping across the canary-coloured sand. She wore a Laura Ashley sun-dress and blue Bata strap-ups. In her hands was a heavy Kalashnikov.

That was enough for Jerry. He retreated into the romance of an earlier age and would have stayed there were it not for the touch of cold steel on his sphincter.

"I need some help, Jerry," she said. She had removed one earphone. It was hideous. Her voice mingled with a hundred machine noises, the video arcades, discos and pinball halls, the traffic of road, sea and air.

"What?" He desperately tried to hear her. It was too late to try to cross her. "Eh?"

"Come along now." She reached towards his other ear.

"Damn you Rasendyll," he said. "Can't they find some other poor devil to be king?"

"You ain't the king, boy. You'd be lucky to be queen for a day. You missed your chances." Shakey Mo's little rat face twitched with a kind of lascivious rage. Hanging about near the steps up to the promenade, he had for obscure reasons smeared blacking on his face. He, too, was sporting a rather unfashion-able olive green leisure suit. Things had to be bad when Mo got this patronising. "Where the hell you been, man? Life goes on, you know, even if you haven't noticed."

"I ain't drunk, I'm just drinkin'," said Jerry.

"You could have fooled me." He removed his wraparound shades with a flick of the wrist once considered sexy.

"Which isn't saying a lot, really." After a second's hesitation Mrs Persson dumped her rifle and the book beside the hot-dog stand. She couldn't make up her mind about them. Nothing stayed obsolete for long, these days.

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## **WHEN A GUITAR PLAYS THE BLUES**

The National Salvation Front government, accused by critics of being closely linked to the Communist Party of late dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, appears to be trying to mend the damage to its international reputation caused by last week's events.

*Reuter/Majorca Daily Bulletin, 24 June 1990*

"IT'S NOT MUCH of a job and you don't get a whole lot of respect." Jerry brushed rain off his sodden fedora. "The pay's no good and the hours are lousy - yet there's something in you has to go on doing it, the way other guys get hooked on dope or, maybe, a woman. Someone has to walk down those streets respectable people don't like to know about, especially when they might have a relative living there. Someone has to take the insults and the bruises and, occasionally, the bullet, so that those respectable folks can sleep peacefully in their beds. In some ways you're a messenger between two mutually selfish sections of society - the Gluttonous Rich and the Vicious Greedy. Well, maybe that's exaggerating just a tad..."

"There's a lot of people in between, a lot of little people. A lot of bad women gone right, and good men gone down, and whores who should have been virgin brides in Wyoming, and judges who a more enlightened age would recognise as calculating psychopaths - and all the rest; every piece of human flotsam, and every kind of virtue... Courage-in-adversity, rotten wealth, Church-pure poverty, damned near insane self-sacrifice and the pettiest, meanest kind of greed you ever heard about. You wouldn't believe it. You don't have to. Only I have to believe it. It's my job."

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## **DON'T TOUCH ME THERE**

I had hoped to be able to secure interviews with the leading figures in the political drama which had set the world wondering and had created consternation in Roumania. I was hopeful of being able to discuss the situation with the King himself, with Goga, and with the most significant figure in Roumania, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, leader of the Iron Guard, fascist, terrorist, murderer and most rabidly violent of Jew-baiters. Arrangements to see King Carol and Goga were

made with comparative ease; to meet Codreanu proved a much more difficult task.

*King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

JERRY WASN'T EVEN sure of immortality any more. The rules kept changing on him and the chronic vibrations were making him ill.

"You're overstretched, lad." With a flourish of his pale grey moustache, Major Nye guided the helicopter away from Dublin where he had discovered Jerry wandering on the frozen Liffey. "You need a bit of time to yourself."

"I didn't think it was allowed."

Clearly Major Nye found this remark in doubtful taste.

"There's not a lot left, after all," Jerry added lamely. "What with the Ukrainian going off like that."

"You're just depressed because of your dream of anarchy. Well, old son, it seems it isn't to be."

"Are you sure there's been no news from Scotland?"

"Not the kind you've been hoping for. I doubt if there's a black flag left flying or an anarchist keel still in the sky. Those days are over, dear boy, even in your fantasies. They never had a chance. Too romantic, even for an experienced India hand like me!"

The references were getting blurred. Jerry understood now why the only bits of history that were interesting were the bits that were almost never recorded. The slow turning of an honest Bavarian burger into a Waffen SS fanatic, for instance. These mysteries remained, so it seemed, the province of unreliable liars and braggarts, falsifiers of their own identities, the novel-ists.

"One's qualifications stand for nothing these days," said Major Nye, turning happily towards Wilton and poetry. "But I'm sure there's some sort of niche you can find for yourself."

Jerry felt the old spirit slipping away again. He was regretful. He had never been able to reach Bucharest in the hey-day of his powers.

"Here we are, dear boy. Keep your chin up."

With cheerful confidence Major Nye put them down.

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## **COLD LONELY NIGHTS**

Mr Iliescu, the son of a railway worker and a one-time favourite of Ceausescu, was not specific about who would be recruited into the new force, designed to deal with political violence. Already many miners have volunteered. Some opposition politicians and student leaders have likened it apprehensively in advance to a modern version of the Nazi brownshirts. "We shall have to see about that," the president replied when asked about its composition.

*The Times, 25 June 1990*

THE MILES OF underground concrete, like some vast, unpopulated parking garage, were lit by busy gas jets set at alarming intervals. Between them were shadows, the stink of blood, the horribly uncleanable miasma of terror. He had to be in the foundations of some evil, if monumentally unimaginative, fortress. He had almost certainly made it to Ceausesculand. Propping the bike against a malodorous pillar, he swung off his rucksack. Beneath his sandwiches and his thermos he discovered a psychic map of the city. It was not as out-of-date as he had feared and Jerry found it easy to follow into the 90s. He paused to do the last of his Columbian Silver. At moments like this, grit and integrity only came in powder form. In some ways, he thought, it was like sniffing the dust of some ancient and forgotten empire; the nearest he got to dreaming these days.

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## **STRIKE LIKE LIGHTNING**

I took up residence in the Athenee Palace Hotel and later in the morning after my arrival, I took stock of this most notorious caravanserai in all Europe. It was exciting to realise that here I was in the meeting place of the Continental spies, political conspirators, adventurers, concession hunters, and financial manipulators. Here at the crossroads, as it were, dividing Europe from Asia, in the centre of the Balkan cockpit, were hatched most of the plots and devilments that, in days gone by, upset a government here, fomented a revolution there and, on occasion, planned an assassination.

*King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

MISS BRUNNER WAS beside herself. “We put a stop to all that,” she said. “We made a land where the English middle classes could bray with confidence.”

“Oh, it’s not such a bad old world.” Gratefully Sir Kingsley lifted another pink gin to the kind of triangular sphincter which was his mouth. In fact, things were looking up, all in all, he thought, at *The Jolly Englishman*. He stared bleakly at his white, puffy fist and longed for his old pals. Most of them had failed to make it into the decade. Come to think of it, he reflected with a mourning grin, so had he.

Miss Brunner thought his attitude defeatist. “You might be enjoying the decline, Sir K, but some of us aren’t going to stand for it.”

“Fair enough.” The embodiment of the nation’s literary aspirations offered her a weary leer. “Bend over, darling.”

She couldn’t resist power, no matter how deliquescent it had become. She giggled and ordered him another double. “You were honoured,” she reminded him admiringly, “for services to your country.”

“For services to Time, actually.” He accepted the gin.

“I do love you intellectuals.”

“Bugger Jane Austen.”

“Fuck George Eliot.”

“Pat Norman Mailer on the bottom.” At this, he recovered himself.

“Naturally.” On trembling palm she offered him her pork scratchings. “How’s your little boy?”

Not everything, she consoled herself, had gone to pot.

“I heard they named a pub after me in Magalluf,” said the old penman proudly. Then, almost immediately, he grew gloomy again.

“My luck, it’s full of blokes in pink underpants drinking Campari Soda.”

## FANNING THE FLAMES

Denying any dichotomy between his speech to the miners and his subsequent more measured address at his inauguration, Mr Iliescu said: "What is fundamental is who started the violence and who provoked the violence."

*The Times, 25 June 1990*

JERRY'S MOPED WAS acting up. It had never been as reliable as the Royal Albert, even on normal roads, and was behaving like a grumbling old dog as it picked its way along Romania's ancient tracks.

The great chasms and towering rocks, the gigantic torrents, gloomy forests and barren shale all inspired in him an awe of

Nature. After less than two hours of this experience he found himself talking loudly to himself in German.

From Goethe it was but a short step to the Jewish Problem, something he had hoped to avoid on this holiday.

*"Blut ist Hut,"* he sang resignedly. *"Sturm me daddy, eighty to the car..."* and with this he began a descent into the cloud-hidden depths of a mysterious valley. So much for the subtleties of the human spirit! For him there were more urgent demands on his attention. How on earth had the English managed to make themselves the narrowest and most reactionary people in Europe and still see themselves as generous and enlightened? It was a wonder to him, and a privilege, to observe this fantastic progress at first hand. Gibbon, for instance, had been forced to speculate and, from his position, had found the decline of Rome almost impossible to accept. Increasingly, this had led him into those mighty abstractions the Victorians created from the stuff of the Enlightenment and which, they convinced themselves, were solid as the British Empire.

*"Das Volk ehrt den Kiinstler, Johnny."*

Marrakech was looking better all the time. Jerry was glad he had lost none of his old instincts. In fact he seemed quicker on his toes than he had been in his glory days. He, better than anyone, knew when to head for the border.

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## YOU AND I

On a certain day, the Jewish community was informed that the Yellow Badge had been introduced in all of Roumania. A sample was sent in with the strict injunction that in a few days the Yellow Badge must be ready and all Jews, men, women and children, were instructed to wear them. In Bukovina, this was immediately introduced... This measure had a devastating effect on the mood of Bucharest... People wearing the Yellow Badge were barred from street cars ... could not go to any offices or approach any authorities. This decree drew a pall over and had a depressing effect upon the city.

*King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

“PERU IS GETTING altogether more interesting, now that a bloody writer’s been beaten by a Jap.” Lifting a gentle hand from his Mars Supapac Bishop Beesley slipped a minibar into his mouth. Outside, through the hotel window, dreamed the dusty streets of some South American capital. “But it needs a better man than me to open up the interior properly. I haven’t the stomach for it.” He descended with a sigh, inch by painful inch, into the largest armchair. “Besides, a man in my position has to cultivate a certain detachment.” He looked thoughtfully to-wards the street where a tall old Englishman paused to peer up. “Can that be Major Nye?”

The hushed tones of the serious professional Christian invaded his mouth and Jerry was startled by this apparent procession until he remembered that the Bishop was expecting another visitor.

“Can we drop you anywhere tomorrow, bishop?” he asked carefully.

Beesley turned eyes upon him that were full of a ghastly benevolence. “Perhaps, dear boy. You’re very kind.” As if in sudden anxiety he glanced again at the window but the English-man had strolled on. Jerry knew Beesley was never happy in Catholic countries, especially Latin America. He had been heading for some other Rio, some magical retreat, when the plane had been diverted here. He stroked his jowls and looked thoughtfully down at his sweat-stained tennis whites.

Jerry turned to leave.

“Do you know?” said Bishop Beesley with some resentment. “The chap downstairs mistook me for a German this morning.”

“Don’t worry, bishop.” The old assassin picked a crumb of chocolate from the handle of the black mitre-case. Noticing how worn and shiny it had become reminded him how long the bishop had been on the run. “Nobody else will.” He closed the door softly, as if upon a corpse.

Downstairs the electricity was off again and, as if waiting for the ride to begin, flies had settled thickly on the blades of the motionless ceiling fan. Others crawled across the darkened screen of a dormant TV still watched by the janitor, as if he perceived some drama denied to all but himself. Jerry glanced into the brilliant street, the glaring stucco, the graffiti and the Coca Cola signs. Maybe it was time to go back to the wild side of life.

The Californian surf was beginning to sound good again and from somewhere overhead he was sure he could hear the com-fortable presence of a rescue chopper.

There had to be somewhere else to go than a colonised Ladbroke Grove, the Cotswolds or a decolonised North Africa.

He had settled on Liberia even before the helicopter descend-ed into a little square, blowing dust through the beaded curtains of the run-down shops and cantinas, sending dogs scattering reluctantly into the deeper shadows of the alleyways.

Professor Hira, his round brown face glowing with sweat and self-satisfaction, reached down a hand. “Welcome aboard, old chap. Oh, by the way -” the Brahmin paused as Major Nye gunned the engine to keep her steady - “Liberia’s out now, too. Any ideas?”

Jerry gave in. Angkor Wat. Anuradaqपुरa, Luxor and New York... all his favorite ruins had been taken over by someone. They’d even sold his roof garden to Richard Branson. To pay his debts, they said. He hadn’t realised he owed anything.

He gave a hazy thought to Sid Vicious as he was lifted dramatically over the rooftops and spires into a pearly reality he had never hoped to find again.

“You missed the second coming,” said Major Nye. “Didn’t he, professor?”

“I think so. Or possibly just God’s second childhood.” Hira giggled. He had a liking for mild blasphemies.

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## DEVIL CHILD

The reluctance of the army to rush to the aid of the government in the recent rioting has been interpreted differently by many Western intelligence experts, who claimed that many officers and soldiers were reluctant to oppose rioters who alleged that the government was run by neo-communists. As part of the power struggle the interior minister General Mihai Chitac, was dismissed after the rioting and control of the police switched from the interior to the defence ministry.

*The Times, 25 June 1990*

OLD SAMMY CAME out of the kitchen into the alley. He was red with sweat. His stained white hat and apron fumed with the greasy heat of the chop shop whose flaring, agitated jets were the constant of his busy Friday night trade. He deep-fried pies and chops to order. Those boiling vats, in which all kinds of questions floated, reminded Jerry what eternal damnation must be like. No wonder those poor bastards were terrified. No wonder they clung to their ramshackle faiths - their habits which they could no more discard than the Jews in 1933 or the English in 1979. They were locked into self-made prisons, justifying all that was most cowardly and most cautious and most unjust in human society. He’d rather have Unitarianism which at least believed in handing out soup and a sandwich from time to time. Faith, he had to admit, was a bit of a baffling one. It couldn’t be good for people.

Nothing fitted.

He’d ride with the tide for a while. After all, the cards were still settling. What had he been getting so angry about?

The sandwiches weren’t, anyway, that bad. He’d recommend the Tuna Melt.

“I had a feeling I was getting in touch with the occult.” On his apron Sammy wiped fingers swollen and impure as his sausages. “But I suppose that’s typical at my time of life, isn’t it?”

Jerry shook his head. He glanced carefully up the alley. "Any port in a storm, eh, Sam? When in doubt consult your stars. What can you lose?"

"What *can* you lose, old son?" Sammy nodded with melan-choly introspection, perhaps revealing all the many things he had already lost.

Above their heads was the blindness of the East End night in those precious years between the Blitz and the Thames Develop-ments.

"There must be easier ways than this of making a living." Sammy drained off another wave of sweat with his heavy arm and dashed the liquid to the concrete of the step. "So long, Jerry. So long, squire. So long." He went back to his chops and his pies. He had only recently introduced the pies to compete with a modern formica cafe across the street, and was not sure if they were worth it. They were bloody hard to fry.

Jerry, munching his free pasty, pushed his bike with one hand round the corner into the blazing white light of Whitechapel High Street, a salutary vision, where the wide roads were already gone through Lemn Street and half the ruins of his youth. Lemn Street had become little more than a slip-road and Wapping Old Stairs was blocked with corrugated iron on which posters for Tommy Steele and Bill Haley were already fading. The grey iron was bent and torn in places and through the gaps Jerry could watch the rain approaching across the moody waters of his Thames, where pieces of timber and old Tizer bottles jugged and drifted above depths which promised every horror. Even the agitated lapping of the water had a sinister, neurotic quality, and Jerry, never a keen East Ender, was glad when he got to the Tower and the waiting motorboat.

"We thought we'd lost you," said Mitzi Beesley, decisively securing her Mae West.

"How was your mum?" Shakey Mo asked over his shoulder as he started the engine.

"She wasn't working tonight." Jerry studied the water, swir-ling like a Mr Softee, and wondered just how many of these memories were actually his.

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## FROZEN ALIVE

The lawyers and doctors, almost without exception, remained in Cernauti when the Russians took it over; a number of Bukovina Jews, who had been living in Bucharest, left for Cernauti when the Russians came, stating that they preferred to live under Russian domination and subsist on dry bread than to live under Roumanian rule and be considered below contempt.

*King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

“LOATHSOME, UNCOUTH, LOUTISH.” Bishop Beesley waved an eloquent Yorkie.” Or am I being unjust, do you think, to that scum of the earth. I like you, my dear sir, I really do. You’re a wag, sir, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

Nobody paid him any attention. The going was proving unexpectedly hard and it was all Shakey Mo could do to keep the armoured car on course. “I still say it’s no part of the Lake District.”

Major Nye wanted to offer them his definition of a gentle-man. Eventually, to take their minds off their discomfort, they gave in, though Mo Collier’s snorts and mutterings remained in the background.

“A gentleman,” Major Nye announced, “should be courteous to all and considerate of all, respectful of all, no matter what their station or their sex. He should be thoroughly read in the literature of the day as well as that of the past, and should be conversant on matters of Science, Nature and the Arts, have some practical reading in moral philosophy and some practical understanding of all these things; he should also have a good knowledge of cookery, fencing, fancy sewing, water colouring, medicine and, of course, riding. He should always be able, with coolness and self-knowledge, to defend his actions, both moral-ly and socially. He should have some accountancy and com-parative religion, some household management, some training in the care of the sick and injured as well as the elderly. He must know the arts of self-defence, perhaps both Karate and Tai Chi, and certain aspects of infant responsibility. His education should emphasise courses in algebra, geography, history and politics, but should otherwise share the common curriculum.”

“You’re a determinist then, Major Nye?” Professor Hira was the only one who had been listening.

“Not in the strictest of senses, old boy, no. In fact I think politics, like

religion, are a man's own damned affair, pardon my French. But live and let live, eh?"

"Have you ever run across such a paragon as you describe, Major?" Professor Hira adjusted his ear-piece. The radio had, for days, been delivering Radio One, set to some antiseptic cycle of current singles repeated one after the other every hour for forty-eight hours until two sides were replaced, until another forty-eight hours had passed, and so on. Professor Hira thought it a miraculous little system and was irritated by any suggestion that it was already hopelessly out of date. Modern technology could randomise anything these days.

"Not in this century, no, old boy."

"Sometimes," said Mo, "you don't even need to do any kind of programme. It's the very latest in pseudo-technology. Wow!" His fingers played over endless invisible keys. He was pro-programming air-computer. His days were truly filled. "Cerebral, man. Punch that code!" He could still function on simple levels and was useful for his old, instinctive skills. "Bam! Psychedelic! Post-modern! Wow! Chaos!"

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## **YEARS SINCE YESTERDAY**

Iliescu said Romania had emerged in a state of moral decay from the era of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, who was toppled and executed last December.

*Reuter/Majorca Daily Bulletin, 21 June 1990*

"GAS," SAID CAPTAIN Maxwell, the English engineer, replacing his stein of Pilsner Urquhart carefully upon the laminated oak, "is the Future." He glared with a kind of proprietorial benevolence around the bierkeller. "That's where the fortunes will be made."

From outside, in Wenceslas Square, the Australian Morris Dancers gave their precise rendition of the Flory Dance. They were said by some to be the hit of the Festival. He looked at Jerry before uttering a hearty laugh. It was as if someone had farted through their face.

Jerry gagged.

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## PLAYING FOR KEEPS

One evening in the early weeks of the 'New Order' in Roumania, a group of armed men, in the green uniform of the Iron Guard, burst into the country house at Sinaia, as the old man of seventy sat at his desk in the study. They fell upon the 'Patriarch of the Roumanian People' and dragged him out of the house to the dark road outside. As he lay on the ground, they cut off his famous flowing white beard, riddled him with bullets, cut his throat, stabbed the already lifeless body and threw it into a sodden ditch by the wayside. When the torn, beardless corpse of Nicolai Jorga was discovered the next morning, there was found, stuffed in his mouth, a copy of *Neamul Romanesc*, dated September 9, 1940, containing the signed 'leader' entitled: 'On the departure of King Carol'. Thus did Roumania, under Hitler's 'New Order' directed by the Nazi Gauleiter 'Red Dog' Antonescu, achieve the 'moral restoration' which this Roumanian general swore to his King, Mihail, to be the holy cause of the overthrow of Carol the Second.

*King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

"EITHER THE HUMAN race is going to have to improve its memory, lose it altogether, or get a new one." Catherine Cornelius gave her brother a dismissive kiss. "You can't fight that kind of amnesia. You might as well give up."

"Never say die, love." Mrs Cornelius went by with a pie. "I can't bloody believe it's Christmas again!" This was her great day of power and she was celebrating.

"God help us, every one," said Jerry.

He shared a despairing wink with his sister.

"I think I'm going to have to slip out for a bit."

She hated to abandon him, but there wasn't much worth saving at the moment.

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## WOUND UP TIGHT

Two West German tourists and two Israelis were injured yesterday when a bomb believed planted by Palestinian militants exploded at the Dead Sea resort of Ein Gedi, police said.

*Reuter/Majorca Daily Bulletin, 24 June 1990*

BISHOP BEESLEY TURNED his head away. For some days now he had taken to wearing a grotesque Commedia del'Arte mask under his mitre. This, together with the cramped conditions of their bunker, tended to hamper his movements until now he was content merely to raise at regular intervals a Snickers to his maw. They were beginning to object to his smell which, though sweet, had a distinctly rotten tinge. His daughter Mitzi had refused point blank to get into the bunker with him and even now sat, with every appearance of comfort, in a wicker chair they had found for her and placed on the roof. From time to time she lifted her old Remington and sighted reminiscently along its barrel. The smoke from the ruins of the Barbican was beau-tiful in the late sunshine. A gentle breeze moved the purple heads of the fireweed and Jerry felt at peace again. He stretched out beside her, his chin in his hands.

"It can't keep going round and round forever, can it?" He blinked "Where am I?" He looked to where the armoured car was still parked. "Romantic."

"Only just," said Beesley, his voice slurred and muffled by chocolate, his mask and the concrete.

Jerry was experiencing such extraordinary *déjà vu* that he could no longer register his surroundings. He glared at the smoke which had become a sort of screen on which were projected a sickening procession of images, each one only subtly different from the last.

"It's Time, I suppose," he said. "It seems all the same. What's wrong?" He raised himself up in alarm.

For once Bishop Beesley had an observation ready.

*"Reductio ad absurdum,"* he said with the hint of a blessing.

He rose suddenly, Mars wrappers rustling and falling about him like autumn leaves.

"Are they here, yet?"



Gradually, all the occupants of the bunker began to climb out until everyone was standing on the roof staring incuriously at the bland horizon.

“There’s no time,” said Jerry, “like the present.”

He was surprised that the thought did not any longer depress him.