

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Clerical Errors

Alan Isler

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## About the Author

Alan Isler was born in London in 1934. His first novel, *The Prince of West End Avenue*, was acclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic. In America it won the National Jewish Book Award and was one of the five fiction nominees for the 1994 National Book Critics Circle Award. In Britain it won the *Jewish Quarterly* Fiction Award. He is also the author of another novel, *Kraven Images* and a collection of novellas, *The Bacon Fancier*.

ALSO BY ALAN ISLER

*The Prince of West End Avenue*

*Kraven Images*

*The Bacon Fancier*

For Adam and Ethan Gahtan

# Clerical Errors

Alan Isler



## THE END OF THE WORLD

Quite unexpectedly as Vasserot  
The armless ambidextrian was lighting  
A match between his great and second toe,  
And Ralph the lion was engaged in biting  
The neck of Madame Sossman while the drum  
Pointed, and Teeny was about to cough  
In waltz-time swinging Jocko by the thumb -  
Quite unexpectedly the top blew off:

And there, there overhead, there, there hung over  
Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,  
There in the starless dark the poise, the hover,  
There with vast wings across the canceled skies,  
There in the sudden blackness the black pall  
Of nothing, nothing, nothing - nothing at all.

Archibald MacLeish

## Part One

A story should be taken with a grain of salt. Salt improves the flavour . . . And a little pepper doesn't hurt, either.

The Ba'al Shem of Ludlow, *Table-Talk*, 1768



SIPPING A CALVADOS in a bar in the rue de Malengin and reading an English newspaper left on the seat by its previous occupant, I discovered to my surprise that I had just died. It appeared that I had driven my car, a modest Morris Minor of a certain age, into the famous Stuart Oak of the Beale estate, the oak so named because planted to commemorate the death of the unfortunate James II. The Stuart Oak had sustained little damage; the Morris Minor was now a twisted, tortured tangle of metal, from which had been extracted a pulped human body supposed to be mine. Our local constable, Timothy 'Tubby' Whiting, had identified the car and its owner. Tubby has a palate for local ale and bitter than which there is surely none more refined. He is, moreover, as am I, a Catholic, he rather more persuasively than I. But he is no Sherlock Holmes, or, for that matter, Father Brown.

First I phoned Maude back at the Hall. She, foolish soul, supposed, or pretended to suppose, I was phoning from the Other Side.

'God be praised! *Deo gratias!* Oh, sweet Jesus! Oh! Oh! Oh!'

'Maude, my love, I'm all right.'

'All right, is it? Of *course* you're all right, there with the Holy Virgin and the blessed angels. Is that the Heavenly Choir I hear?'

From the jukebox at the back of the bar the late Edith Piaf sang 'Milord'.

'I mean that I'm not dead.'

'Not dead, is it? Of course you're not dead! Everlasting Life, that's what He promised us, that's why He bled upon the Cross. Oh, I must tell Father Bastien immediately. Oh, Edmond, I miss you so. Be patient, my love. I'll be with you as soon as I'm allowed.' And she hung up.

The silly old woman! It's extraordinary how *any* sort of excitement brings back the brogue she otherwise

abandoned with her youth. She was jesting, surely. Her relief must have found its outlet in hysteria. And, no doubt, 'mother's ruin' has played its part, too. Yes, gin has long been her favourite tippie, and lots of it – but at a pinch she will make do with whatever's on offer. She likes to pretend that I am the one who has 'a little drinking problem'; as for her, why, she drinks merely to be sociable or because she finds herself without company, or because she feels cheerful or because she is bored, or because she is worried or because she's not. We don't talk about it.

Ah, but to remember what she was like when first I knew her, Maude Moriarty, the keeper of my house and my flesh, lo these many years! Ah, the swish of her hips, the rustle of her skirts, the slender shape of her arched above me! And yet to see and hear what she has become as Time's wingèd chariot rattles behind us, nearer and nearer! Gone – or, at any rate, usually hidden nowadays – are the wit and the sharp intelligence. She has played an Irish washerwoman for so long, she has at last become one. Too much television, perhaps.

O she had not these ways  
When all the wild summer was in her gaze.

Next I phoned Tubby, assuring him that I was as good as on my way home. His shock at hearing my voice was somewhat mitigated by his acceptance of the glad tidings: I was still alive. 'But who *was* it, then, father,' he said almost accusingly, 'we squeezed and scraped out of the car? He must've been doing a hundred down the drive.' The drive is curved and dangerously steep as it plunges towards the Stuart Oak.

'D'you suppose it was poor Trevor? As I remember, I'd asked him to pick up the car over the weekend. The hand-brake had given out, and the foot-brake was sluggish.'

Trevor Stuffins was our local odd-job man, a fellow of my own age and girth.

'Hmmm,' said Tubby non-committally.

'We must pray for his soul.'

'He was a Protestant, Father.'

'All the more reason.'

'If it *was* Trevor.' Tubby was capable of learning from his mistakes.

'Do me a favour, Tubby, go and have a word with Maude. Explain to her I'm still alive - alive, that is, in the *this-worldly* sense. Do it gently.'

Before leaving the rue de Malengin, I ordered another Calvados and sipped it slowly. My trip to Paris had been a failure, but I felt somehow like one recalled to life.

\* \* \*

COULD IT BE that Castignac was right? He had telephoned me a month before, getting to a phone who knew how, and warned that Vatican assassins were after me. 'Watch out, Edmond, pay attention! They want you dead!' This was followed by a mad cackle. 'They will stop at nothing! Nothing!' And then the line went suddenly silent.

But poor Castignac is a lunatic. Why should I have paid attention?

Well, perhaps because of the historical record. *Parva*, as we say, *componere magnis*, to compare small things with big, the popes themselves have not been safe from their co-religionists, even as their co-religionists have not been safe from the popes. In the tenth century fully one in three popes died in (nudge-nudge) 'suspicious circumstances'. Pope Stephen VI was deposed and strangled in prison. As for murderous corruption, poisonous intrigue and the savage pursuit of power, why, everyone knows that the popes of the High Renaissance - the Borgias and their like - wrote the book, created the template. To step a little closer to our own

time, what of John Paul I, who in died in 1978 after only thirty-four days on the throne, eh? I point only to the fact, nothing more. Dear me, no. But if so magnificent a beast as a lion may be cruelly slain in his lair, what hope for compassion has a mere flea?

Still, a sense of proportion is a wonderful thing. I cannot truly believe that what I might call the Upper Hierarchy is after my blood, much as they would like to see me out of a job. No, but rather lower down, though - Father Fred Twombly, say, Chairman of the Department of English at Holyrood College, Joliet, Illinois, my undoubted enemy since we were graduate students together in Paris, the wretch who wants my job; the fact that I have it and that he does not gnawing at his vitals like a poisonous mineral. He, I think, if all else failed him, could interfere with the brakes of my car.

But all else has not yet failed him. He thinks he has me by the hip, and it may be that he has. I shall soon have to tell you about his latest letter to me, the occasion of my trip to Paris.

Perhaps I should pray.

Perhaps not.

At what moment, I wonder, did I lose my faith? It is a question that has no answer, a semantic dilemma. Have you stopped beating your wife? To lose something - virginity, say, or a gold watch - one must first have possessed it. But I put it on, this faith, because it was offered me, it *suit*ed me, it was a habit, in both senses of the word. It was at once an ecclesiastical vestment, an outward sign of belief, and a way of life to which I became comfortably - well, perhaps that word needs modification, but, for the moment, let it stand - *comfortably* accustomed.

Which brings the young Castignac's joke to mind. He rose to the exalted rank of Papal Nuncio, travelled the world - Guatemala, Lebanon, Hawaii, wherever the Holy See had need of him - a spy, after his fashion, yes, one of God's

spies, gazing into the mystery of things. But he also learned at first hand the intricacies of the Vatican's inner workings, what the Protestant Milton calls its secret conclaves. And where is he now? As I have said, stark staring mad, terminally bonkers, or so designated, and in the merciful hands of the Sisters of the Five Wounds, a hospice in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Well, he always liked America, did Castignac.

But why do I mention him? Ah, yes, the joke. We were seminarians then, you see, the old Adam not quite squeezed out of us. Not out of Castignac, in particular. What a rogue he was! He possessed the blue-black, curly hair, black eyes and olive skin of the true Corsican, a young Napoleon, but well endowed, hugely endowed. In the dormitory, he slapped away at it. 'Down, wicked fellow, down!' and thus revealed himself, grandly tumescent, to our secret envy. 'Look,' he said one early morning, pointing through the window grille to the courtyard, where an ancient van idled and out of which stepped a young woman. She opened the van's back door and took out a basket. 'That's Véronique,' he said. 'She's the laundress. Every fortnight, she picks up the monks' dirty habits.' He looked at us slyly, and then he roared with laughter. And so we understood we had been told a joke.

But to get back to the question of faith. In those early days, I gloried in the words of Tertullian. *Certum est quia absurdum est*. Those words had - to use the modern idiom - a certain in-your-face quality that appealed to the adolescent that I was. To believe in something *because* it is absurd! Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. But I had in any case reasons enough to be grateful to them, to the Church, I mean. (Notice that 'them'. What an astonishing irruption after all these years!) I was taken in, given shelter, occasionally shown kindness. Those were terrifying times, quite terrifying. The saintly fathers saved my life, and - so they believed - my immortal soul.

Still, I had an early taste for it, I must admit: the incense, the chanting, one's breath during Mass of a winter's morning rising like mist to the cathedral's vault. I enjoyed, not piety, but the spectacle of piety, and, to the burgeoning visionary imagination, myself as pious. I could see myself on my knees, dragging myself over the cruel stones, to throw my broken body, bloodied, prostrate before the Cross. Of course, I never did any such thing. Self-flagellation, outside of the visionary imagination, was not my style. Perhaps I felt a little of what moved Edward Gibbon (who was to show with devastating irony in his *Decline and Fall* the utter nonsense and demonstrable cruelty of Christianity) to embrace Roman Catholicism in his impressionable youth:

The marvellous tales that are so boldly attested by the Basils and Chrysostoms, the Austins and Jeromes, compelled me to embrace the superior merits of celibacy, the institutions of the monastic life, the use of the sign of the Cross, of holy oil, and even of images, the invocation of saints, the worship of relics, the rudiments of purgatory in prayers for the dead, and the tremendous mystery of the sacrifice and the body and blood of Christ, which insensibly swelled into the prodigy of Transubstantiation.

Thus Gibbon in his *Autobiography*, writing of the follies of his youth. Well, I was not (and am not) a Gibbon, but it is clear enough to me now that what I possessed as a youth was a painterly inner eye, if not a painter's ability. I saw, as it were, a Catholicism as it might exist in a Platonic realm of Ideas, and to *that* I responded, a victory of frosty sensuality over pulsating reason.

But to return to Tertullian, to know, intellectually, that the whole rigamarole was *absurdum* and therefore to believe . . . well, really. Suppose I had put it to the faithful as follows: 'Know that the world and all that inhabits it - all of you, my dear little brothers and sisters, and even I myself - we are actually resident in the mind of a monstrous carp swimming languidly in the warm waters of Eternity. *Certum est quia absurdum est.*' You see what I mean. It is not for

nothing that the phrase 'hocus-pocus' derives from the words of consecration in the Mass, '*Hoc est enim corpus meum*', and in turn gives birth to the word 'hoax'.

And yet here I am in black suit and dog collar, and, of course, my colour-coordinated black-and-white trainers (my bunions, you see), back home from Paris, mission unaccomplished, awaiting a courtesy call from the German Ambassador. The pious, thankfully few in number in my neck of the woods, bow and scrape before me - or would, perhaps, if I spent more time among them. Bastien appeared at my side. 'Our Côte de Gherlaine is quite used up, father, but we have an untroubled Coeur de Languedoc, 1963, a gift of Colonel Fulke-Greville, grateful for your kindness on his recent visit. May I tempt you?' '*Retro me, Satana,*' I said sternly. But then I saw his crestfallen face: 'But of course, my dear Bastien. What luck! A Coeur de Languedoc! The Colonel is too kind. You will not only convey to him my gratitude, noting that nothing we were able to do for him could match his generosity, but you will pour a glass of it for yourself.'

It is so easy to be gracious.

Bastien, the donkey, has been with me, appropriately, for donkey's years. He has grown old in my service, my factotum. How would I get on without him? Slipped indoors and out, curved like a question mark, wisps of white hair attached untidily to an almost bald pate, he stands in his stained cassock, knees bent and splayed, bouncing gently as if he were an exhausted spring. He is another to whom Time has not been kind. Odd he has long been, for reasons I shall no doubt divulge, but he also possesses a kind of peasant shrewdness and a honed intelligence that show themselves when least expected. That I keep him on in so privileged a position rather than arrange for his retirement is regarded as a unique sign of my inviolable charity. But I have known him since our schooldays. We

were orphans together. He would be lost without me – I say it in all modesty – and I suspect that I would be lost without him.

His joy at my recent resurrection was unfeigned. He spared not a tear for poor Trevor – yes, Trevor it was who had died in my place – or for Trevor’s distraught sister-in-law from Wigan, now conferring with her solicitors, for, as Tubby told me lugubriously, using language appropriate to a sexually distraught maiden aunt, it was likely that the brakes, hand and foot, ‘had been *interfered* with’. I, he was happy to report, was ‘not in the frame’. But somebody had been out to get Trevor. I did not tell Tubby that I was myself a likelier target.

Bastien placed two glasses on the table beside me. I was in my study, the Music Room, on my cushioned chair, my poor feet on a yielding stool. He retired momentarily but returned with the bottle of Coeur de Languedoc. Around his neck, where his cross should be, hung a corkscrew on a string. Bouncing gently, he held the bottle before my eyes, label towards me; and, as if in the hands of a drunken sommelier, the bottle bounced with him. I could not have read it if I would.

‘That’s it,’ I said, ‘the very thing. No cork-sniffing, Bastien, no preliminaries. Let’s to it.’

I held the filled glass up to the light.

‘Stand off a little,’ I said, waving with my free hand. He has in these last years acquired an unpleasant smell, has Father Bastien, not strong, to be sure, not unwholesome, but rather like the aroma of turned-over compost that, on a damp day, reaches one from a distance. ‘I want to see the famous Coeur de Languedoc ruby.’ What I saw, in fact, were his greasy finger smudges on the glass. But no matter. Bastien was now at a safe distance, bouncing after his fashion, his wine in danger of slopping over the glass’s rim. He would not, honest fellow, drink before his master. I



sipped. 'Aah!' I smacked my lips. I sipped again. This was his signal to drink.

Why, you may wonder, do I keep him on? In part, as I have said, because his continuing presence here is a visible *earnest* of my charitable disposition. All to the good, that, all to the good. Besides, there is no more discreet man than he. Pincers to his tongue would not draw from him my secrets. And oh, I have a secret or two. In some, we are complicit, he and I.

'A short nap, I think, before the arrival of the German Ambassador. We'll offer him one of our sherries, good Bastien.' I winked at him. 'He need not know we have a Coeur de Languedoc, 1963.'

'*Sale boche!*' he grumbled.

I reproved him gently, as was my fashion. 'Love is the lesson that the Lord us taught.'

\* \* \*

HOW ON EARTH did I get myself into such a pickle? Are the agents of the Vatican after me in England, now, virtually at the end of the millennium, simply because almost six decades earlier the *Wehrmacht* marched triumphantly into Paris, that time, you may remember, when Hitler gave his little hop of delight? It's hard to believe. History, even personal history, has its problems. Leopold von Ranke blithely advises us to write history '*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*', as it *actually* was. But how *was* it, actually? However much I try to re-create the past, I necessarily view it through the unreliable eyes of the present. No, Croce had it right: 'All history is contemporary history.' Nor was Hobbes far off the mark: 'Imagination and memory are but one thing.' And further complicating my difficulty, I have always felt a certain sympathy with what is essentially a Marxist stance *vis-à-vis* the role of accident, chance and contingency in history - as compared, I mean, with the role

of underlying, ineluctable social patterns. For example, I believe it unlikely European history would have been much different in the Thirties and Forties had Hitler died in 1928. But I find myself, for all that, increasingly of the opinion that accident, chance and contingency rule individual lives, mine in particular.

I really ought to explain what two Frenchmen, Bastien and I, are doing here in England, in the first place. Before that, I ought to reveal that I am in fact a Jew – well, that I arrived in this world a Jew. My parents were born not in France but in Hungary, in Dunaharaszti, to be exact, a townlet south of Budapest, and went to Paris, a young married couple, in 1923, a mere five years before my birth.

Curiously (and coincidentally), Dunaharaszti was also the birthplace of Solomon Reuben Hayyim Falsch (1720?-96), kabbalist, sorcerer, scallywag and sometime adventurer, who, reformed (or, perhaps like Shakespeare's Prince Hal, choosing the moment to reveal to the world his true self), became known to his disciples as פִּישׁ, the Pish, a word formed from the acronym of his supposed attributes: פּוֹמֶסֶק יוֹנֵצַ שְׁנִיָּא – roughly, Exalted and Prudent Advisor and Giver of Judgement. Falsch in his time blossomed into the Ba'al Shem of Ludlow. Now here is a figure who, for all sorts of reasons, appeals to me. I shall have rather more to say of him anon.

My father, Konrad Musi?, was something of a *schlimazel*, a born loser, a fact that may have saved his life. He was a sallow man, inclined to *embonpoint*, and he usually wore, apart from a thick serge suit and a shirt with celluloid collars, a meaningless scowl. In the Marais, he opened a small shop, dark, dank, selling buttons of various sorts, threads, needles and, on occasion, Jewish artifacts, prayer shawls, decorative yarmulkes, the odd Chanukah *dredl* that sort of thing. I do not remember that the shop was much peopled by customers. Nevertheless, from this unlikely enterprise, he eked out a living. Beyond this, or perhaps

allied with this, my father fidgeted a lot, was never still. Even when seated in an easy chair, he would twitch a leg and twirl a small pillow between his hands. You'd have thought that so much nervous activity would have whittled him down. Not at all. We lived in a small flat immediately above the shop.

I look nothing like him, my father, I might add, and have often doubted my paternity. On the other hand, honesty compels me to say that in old age I look rather anomalous in my priestly costume. The truth is, I look like an old Jew of Middle European origin, which of course I am, unmistakable to those who know. Not the stereotype promulgated by the Nazis and those who think like them, not quite, but unquestionably Jewish, just the same. (Yet, in what does this 'Jewishness' reside, I wonder? The particular rounding of the back, what in middle-aged Jewish women is known as 'Hadassah hump'? The sudden assertive fullness of the nose? Could that be it? The lengthening ears? The wholly unexpected but sudden omnipresence of the shrug? In all these, at least, I resemble my father in his final years.) Damn it all, I *do* begin to sound like one of the anti-Semites! Still, nowadays, as I look at myself in the mirror and view my rotund priestly self, I seem to see a species of mountebank, at the very least an actor in the Yiddish Theatre, a Jew dressed up to represent the enemy.

But where was I? Ah, yes, my parents. My mother was a beauty, that needs saying. I have photographs of her that corroborate memory. How to describe her? She was taller than my father, and slim, wonderfully shapely, with the kind of tubular, pliant figure so admired in the Thirties. Her beauty was that of the eternally pure American film star Claudette Colbert, but crossed with that of the more recent, passionately earthy, French Jeanne Moreau, but Jeanne Moreau in her prime. How extraordinary that she should have been married to my father! But I suppose that, of all her suitors in Dunaharaszti, it was he alone who promised to

take her to Paris. Paris was where she belonged. Her French name was Hélène, *née* Shayna Blum. When my father called her 'la belle Hélène', which he was wont to do, she would reward him with a bored and weary smile. I adored her. Alas, I am not sure that she cared much for me. I don't really know.

On the other hand, I shared her bed until my tenth year. By then my hapless father had long accepted the notion of satisfying his bestial passions elsewhere. (Whether he *did* satisfy them elsewhere is a matter for pointless and distasteful conjecture. He slept on a pallet that he arranged nightly on the shop's counter-top. As a small child, I imagined him below bravely protecting us from villains.) My mother's ruse of having me in her bed should not be understood to mean that she herself was not of a passionate nature. She was, and she entertained her lovers in the afternoons. Her chief occupation was the cosmetic preservation of her complexion, and she sought to maintain her beauty sleep unbroken by lying through the long mornings absolutely motionless in the bed. My earliest memories are of lying beside her, already knowing I must not say a word.

It was one of her lovers who betrayed her in the end, the butch-bitch Madeleine Dormeuil, whose brother was a *flic* in the local *gendarmerie*. We had fled as a family to Orleans at the beginning of the war. 'Why Orléans?' you ask. I have no idea. Perhaps my parents had friends there; perhaps my father had heard of work. It was a move that for me had the most serious consequences. Paris, in any case, was in panic. The important thing, it seemed to my parents, was to save *l'enfant* from the bombardment Paris was certain to suffer, the falling buildings, the poison gas, and so on. My father was mobilised, to be sure - I remember him in uniform - but it was not the fate of the French army to require his services for long. In 1941 he made his first secret foray into the ZNO, the unoccupied zone.

Orleans was no safer for us than Paris. Jews, for example, were required to register *qua* Jews with the police, a terrifying requirement that my parents were able to ignore by assuring one another that their proper place of registration was not Orleans but Paris. The plan was for Papa to find work and shelter somewhere south of the Massif Central and then send for Maman and me. Whenever Papa slipped south, Maman slipped north - to Paris, ostensibly to keep an eye on the shop and the flat above it, but actually to lie in the arms of her adored Madeleine. While she was gone I was to be obedient to 'Tante' Louise, our elderly, austere Catholic landlady, who, for an extra few francs, agreed to keep a motherly eye on a refugee child.

On 16 July 1942, a scribbled note from my father was delivered into the hands of Tante Louise, once more acting *in loco matris*: he was in St-Pons, not far from Béziers, in the Hérault department, whither we should make our way with cautious haste. But also on 16 July 1942, with the kind of symmetrical neatness that almost makes one believe in a purposeful deity, my mother was arrested, betrayed, rounded up with thousands of her co-religionists by the police of Paris and their eager helpers and dumped in the Vel d'Hiv, where she spent a week in conditions that Dante himself might have balked at describing. This intelligence came to Tante Louise in yet another scribbled note. This time my *tante de convenance* was acting *in loco patris*. From the Vel d'Hiv my mother was sent to Drancy, where she languished in misery for five months, managing, my beautiful mother, to bribe a policeman - one dare not decently ask how, for she had no money - to deliver to us (via Tante Louise) her letters. From Drancy she was dispatched to Auschwitz, from which she was dispatched. As for Madeleine Dormeuil, may she burn for ever in the deepest circle of hell - were there only such a place! *Du calme, du calme*. I get ahead of myself.



BEALE HALL IS situated atop a long and gentle rise in the Corve Dales and thus commands magnificent views over its own park and woodlands. On the northern boundary of the estate, a tributary of the River Corve itself meanders by; to the distant south may just be seen, when in winter months a stand of beech has shed all foliage, a portion of Ludlow Castle's ruined keep. The Hall was designed by Sir John Vanbrugh for Sir Peregrine Beale in 1693, a *jeu d'esprit* in whose magnificence one can easily read *in piccolo*, as it were, the lineaments of the yet undreamed-of Castle Howard. What caused this successful playwright to undertake architectural design - we say nothing at the moment of his unexpected architectural genius - may never be known. We *do* know, however, that Sir Peregrine and he were boozing and wenching companions and that both took fencing lessons under Gaston Lefeu in his Academy in Piddle Lane. Perhaps that is explanation enough. The surprise of Vanbrugh's contemporaries in his new venture is preserved in an execrable couplet ascribed by tradition to none other than Jonathan Swift:

'Tis claim'd in Town than quondam *Scribbler* Van  
Has quit the Stage and turn'd a *Buildings* Man!

If some of the above sounds to you like the effusions of a guidebook, take heart: you have an ear for prose. Most of it comes from *Beale Hall, A History and Guide*, an illustrated pamphlet for visitors that sold when it first appeared in 1956 for fourpence, Old Style, and may now be had for ninety pence, New Style, unchanged in content if not in appearance - we now print on glossy paper. I have not used inverted commas for my quotations because - yes, laugh if you must - I myself am the author of *Beale Hall, A History and Guide*, and so there is no question of plagiarism. But if you have, as I posited at the beginning of this paragraph, an

ear for prose, then I trust you have recognised that even in 1956 my English was sufficiently fluent to parody *guidebook-ese*, if I may so term it. By now, of course, I use the language as if it were my first, the instrument of all my thoughts, even of my dreams. I am far more comfortable with it than I am with my native French, whose finer points of grammar and more arcane vocabulary tend little by little to slip from me. On my recent visit to Paris, a taxi driver actually answered me in English, a sure sign that he thought me a foreigner, one probably from across the Channel!

Of course, my spoken English is still marked by a slight French accent, one that fifty years ago seems to have pleased the ear (and other parts) of the female Anglophone. The young Kiki, for example, described it as 'sexy'; the young Maude said that it had from the first 'dampened her knickers'. Well, well, I have no wish to boast. In any case, these pages will either reveal my command of the language or my ignorance of it. As for the pamphlet, I shall certainly quote from it again, but you should understand why. It is in Beale Hall that Bastien and I live and, thanks to Kiki, have lived for almost half a century now.

\* \* \*

THERE IS SO much to tell and perhaps only a little time. Where to begin? I emancipated two gnomes this morning. Is that relevant? I got the idea from the French, of all people. The young over there are so much *better* than they were in my day. At any rate, a group of them are in secret - they wear bright balaclavas for their photographs, their flashing eyes and perfect teeth alone visible, gnomes under their protective arms - removing the fairy folk from bourgeois gardens and setting them free in the forests, 'their natural habitat'. This morning, moments before sunrise, I liberated two of them from the front garden of Benghazi, Major Catchpole's cottage - one gnome, *couchant*, with a

languidly held fishing pole, and another sitting, finger along his nose, on a pseudo-toadstool - and let them loose in Tetley Wood.

Tetley Wood, once part of the Beale estate, now borders it. The woods were sold off by the last of Sir Peregrine's descendants, Squadron Leader Sir Ferdinando Beale, to help pay the death duties imposed on his inheritance by the victorious, post-war Labour government. He died without issue in 1951, hanging himself from the lower branches of the Stuart Oak, a homosexual victim of blackmailers. His heir was Lady Violet Devlin, my very own Kiki, and she, already into New Age living *avant la lettre* - albeit, in that far-off time, Catholic in hue - had no interest in the property. She gave it to the Church, specifically to the Vatican, but with certain provisos: Beale Hall, its accommodations, peerless library and grounds were to become a scholarly Catholic retreat, maintained by the Devlin Trust, to be created for the purpose. Its first Director General was to be Father Edmond Music, yours truly, whose tenure was for life, unless at some point, having given due notice to the Trust, he chose to retire, or it came to the attention of the Trust, buttressed by irrefutable medical evidence, that his health seriously impaired the fulfilment of his duties. The Director General, short of selling the estate, had absolute control over Beale Hall and its grounds. Not bad, eh?

That was Kiki, my well-loved Kiki, responding magnificently to my plea to her in 1954 that if I had to suffer another parish I would perish, that I could bear no longer to cast artificial pearls before real swine. She was then in Big Sur, California. An alert surfer having spotted the Blessed Virgin Mary rising Venus-like from a large half-shell, thousands of the faithful had duly assembled on the wonder-working beach, Kiki among them. But she took time out from her BVM vigil to arrange my future. (By 1960 Kiki, inspired by Aldous Huxley, had moved on to the sacred mushroom and other natural psychedelic routes to mystical



truths; in 1975, having by then lived for some years in Sausalito, she overdosed on a powerful cocktail of mind-bending pills. In Beale Hall, I conducted a special Mass. For me, she was *fidelitas ipse*, loyalty writ large. Ever since her death, the Church has been trying to oust me.)

The road through the estate begins at the massive iron gates, now permanently open, that pierce the high park wall along the southern perimeter. It passes the gatekeeper's cottage, thatched and built in late-Victorian days of the local stone, unoccupied now but for our local lads and lasses, who use it for their amorous pursuits, and then begins immediately to curve around a lake that is pinched in its centre as if to accommodate its balustraded bridge. Duck and moorhen dabble among the reeds. The road begins to rise now, and quite sharply, past the Stuart Oak, where once Sir Ferdinando and latterly poor old Trevor met their deaths, and under arching trees, ancient oak and chestnut, through which one catches occasional glimpses in the distance of the column erected by Sir Humphrey Beale to celebrate Nelson's famous victory at Trafalgar. Now the road divides, one arm branching off to the stable block on the right, with its central archway and clock tower, converted under my direction more than thirty years ago into administrative office, kitchen, refectory, all-purpose lounge and small bed-sitters for our visiting scholars. The presence of so many dog collars, Jesuits for the most part, in Beale Hall itself and at all hours, I soon found irksome. The conversion of the stable block was the obvious answer. Of course, I can't keep them out of the library or the chapel, but I can and do restrict library hours and I have Bastien put them on some sort of a rota for taking services. In fact, they are greeted by slippered Bastien upon arrival, fêted by slippered Bastien during their stay, and fare-thee-welled by slippered Bastien upon departure. I seldom see any of them any more. (The seculars are another matter. I vet the list of applicants myself and limit admissions to those who seem interesting.)

The other branch of the road now widens and soon Beale Hall itself, this magnificent baroque mansion, comes into sight. One notices first – but I can't burble on like this! If you're interested in such matters, I urge you to read *Beale Hall, A History and Guide*. Find out there, for example, about the Great Hall, its extraordinary chimneypiece, the even more extraordinary painting by Giovanni Malocchio in its dome: Aphrodite, Britomartis and Ellen Scrim-Pitt of Drury Lane, all largely starkers, all ascending to the Empyrean while wingèd amoretti, puffy-cheeked, blow trumpets, and all offering a most unexpected view of their rotund beauties, a masterpiece of erotic perspective. In my *History and Guide*, which bears the *Nihil Obstat*, I identify the ladies, discreetly, as Faith, Hope and Charity, and suggest that they are descending *from*, not ascending *to*, heaven. Whether the greatest of these ladies is Charity (i.e., Ellen Scrim-Pitt) is bound to be a matter of taste. She certainly has the greatest bum and is, of the three, the one upon whom my gaze has always lingered. At any rate, I shall speak of the Library, the Tapestry Room, the Long Galleries, the splendid collection of pictures and furniture, the paintings by Rubens, Domenico Feti, Holbein, Van Dyck, Lely, Kneller, Hogarth, Stubbs, Turner, and so on, only as and if they come up. So too with the Chapel, altered in 1875 by Charles Ogilvie Beale, who had deserted Rome for Canterbury (until he lay dying), which boasts a bas-relief by Mantovani and stained glass by Morris and Burne-Jones. But the Music Room is another matter. I have made the Music Room my own, my private domain, where I have spent most of my waking hours (and not a few hours in slumber) for almost fifty years. With this room I was beguiled from the first, by its beauties, its elegant proportions and, of course, its name. It once was, and now again is, the *Music Room*.



MAJOR WILLIAM CLIVE ('Call me "W.C.", old boy!') Catchpole, OBE, had been a Desert Rat who had served with distinction under Montgomery in North Africa. What he had seen there of human suffering, folly, wickedness and, yes, heroism had caused him to lose his faith. He had entered the war a Roman Catholic, 'idiotically devout, old chap'; he had emerged a confirmed atheist. No priest, not even His Holiness - '*your* master, not mine, old son' - could fob him off with pietistic apologia for ubiquitous, gratuitous evil. He had been sprayed with the blood and brains, pierced by the splintered bones, of comrades blown up before his eyes; he had heard the screams of men burning alive in their tanks, smelled the rank odour of the spilled guts their shocked owners strove in vain to stuff back into gurgling cavities. And he knew that whatever murderous evil the Germans were wreaking on English lads, English lads were striving to wreak on them. 'Where was your God while all that was going on, that tiny part, I mean, of a far greater atrocity stretching back through time beyond the Crucifixion - although doctrinally, perhaps, the Crucifixion is far back enough - and from there forward to today? Where, father, was your gentle Jesus, then?'

No contest.

For Catchpole, though, once that card had been removed, the whole House of Cards fell apart. His former faith lay in ruins about him. He became, if I may so term it, a *crusading* atheist. He put on the glistening armour of Truth and took up the razor-sharp weapons of Reason. Put less fancifully, Catholicism-bashing became his avocation. And since we are neighbours - indeed, have been neighbours for almost half a century now - and I am conveniently to hand, I have long been the recipient of his anti-Catholic attacks.

Let me say at once that I like the Major, I like him very much indeed, and he, I think, likes me. We are, and have long been, friends. It is in this context that my theft of his

garden gnomes must be seen. It is a move in a long-standing contest. The contest is normally verbal, and he has all the best lines. The theft will, I hope, shift our ongoing, friendly arguments to less familiar territory.

We play chess once a week, alternating between the Music Room at Beale Hall and the parlour of Benghazi, the Major's cottage on the edge of Tetley Wood, once the gamekeeper's cottage on the original estate. We are not very good at chess, but we *are*, at least, equally bad. Of course, chess is merely an excuse for regular meetings. At Beale Hall, Maude has for decades brought to the chess players their refreshments, sandwiches, seed cake or lemon tart, a pot of tea. The Major has long known - I am sure of it - that Maude and I share a bed, but he has pretended otherwise. He would not use that knowledge in his attack on Catholic hypocrisy; he was, and is, a gentleman.

Of course, I have never spoken to him of his stream of cousins, nieces and housekeepers, a stream, of late, drying up. But then, how could I? He had married shortly after the war a woman whose post-natal depression could be traced back, seemingly, to her own birth. Imogen carried about with her an unfailing suggestion of bleakness, of a grey overcast made filthier with stains of yellow and black. 'She cast me down, old chap. Not her fault, poor soul, but she cast me down.' She had seemed always on the point of tears, the tip of her nose red, as if with a perpetual cold. He was Patience on a monument, and she was Grief; only, he could not smile.

They lived together for twelve miserable years. 'Bit of luck at that point. Her doctor-chappie, probably sick and tired of her whinging on, suggested a month or two in Brighton, bracing sea air, would do her the world of good, take her out of herself, that sort of thing. Well, in Brighton she met this Spanish dancer, Blasco Mendoza - ever heard of him? No matter. Not Spanish, actually. Came from Brooklyn, New York. They fell in love, perfect mesh of temperaments, for all