

Laszlo's Millions by Jon Elkon This is Chapter One! AND Two!

Withers Stronglode Withers and Truelove
Solicitors and Commissioners for Oaths
5a London Wall London EC4

February 20 1971

Dear Sir

Re: Thomas Bloch.

I have been fortunate in having obtained a small proportion of the immense folio of notes made by Mr Bloch before his disappearance. I append a copy herewith which I have attempted to arrange into some sort of order for your perusal.

As you will be aware there remains a great deal of controversy surrounding the circumstances of Mr Thomas' disappearance. The recent article by Fred Healey in the Guardian entitled 'The Vanishing Thin Heir' (appendix 17) proposes the theory that he was kidnapped by the South African Bureau of State Security ('BoSS') and reposes in some solitary cell deep in the bowels of John Vorster Square. There are many other theories, one of the most bizarre of which is that he and his vehicle were abducted by aliens, and quotes the notes found along the M4 as evidence that he no longer needed the essentials of earthly civilisation.

As for myself I prefer to think that the vanished Mr Bloch remains alive in a dive somewhere between here and there; that his disappearance is a result of the mental aberration so common in your family, sir.

I conclude by informing you that unless you want the enclosed published, you will see fit to reinstate me in my position and pay me shitloads of money.

Yours etc

James

J. T. Truelove BA LLB

1

One

One wet evening in March 1969 Robert Stone stopped snoring. His soul climbed out of his body and went for a walk in the sky. He died almost penniless, nearly brainless, in his smart flat in Killarney Heights, Johannesburg, which he had shared with his wife Hazel.

Three weeks later Hazel became a multimillionaire. Her good fortune lasted just sixty-two seconds.

Two

November 1938

A brother and sister hand in hand on the deck of the Union Castle liner the *Blenheim Castle* watched as the immense angular bulk of Table Mountain receded across a white-flecked brilliantly green sea. She had invisible tears. He frowned through a mist of pain. His name was Ian, hers was Hazel.

Their mission was to save Ian's life. He had a tumour the size of a peanut growing in his brain. Their destination was Edinburgh where Sir James McCullough lived and practised. He was the only man in the world who could possibly save Ian's life.

Hazel was tall with almost white hair above brown roots; a finely moulded face with high aristocratic cheekbones. She was dressed in a white pleated skirt and navy silk blouse. She was extraordinarily, excruciatingly beautiful. At eighteen, a virgin.

Ian was twenty two, thin and gangly, effete yet manly in a tweedy English Counties way. Had he not been addled with pain he would certainly have smoked a pipe. He was not a virgin.

Ian and Hazel loved each other jealously, passionately and exclusively. Ian's dalliances with other members of Hazel's sex had been resented and vigorously if subtly contested by her. None of his adventures had been turned into anything remotely resembling commitment.

They looked like a perfect couple there at the railing. 'What a perfect couple' Mannie Goldberg the industrialist said to his wife Myra.

'You know nothing', Myra replied testily. 'Firstly, they're brother and sister...'

'Really?'

'Really', she settled herself deeper into the deckchair and rearranged her shawl. 'and secondly, the boy has syphilis'

'Oh my goodness, don't tell me that'

'Or something....and what's even more sad - '

'There's more?'

'What's sadder is how they raised the money for this little journey...'
she drew back, tapped the right side of her nose with her forefinger.

*

The Goldbergs shared a table with the Grants at dinner. Hazel was demure, withdrawn. She wasn't certain she wanted to sit at the same table with nouveau-riche Jews. Mannie was delighted – he had been fascinated by the scraps of information from his wife about the couple.

Mannie was a man with a dull corpulent grey exterior, a typical timber baron – smelling, of course, of whisky and cigars. Internally he was multicoloured and rich, a frustrated novelist, a people-watcher and tuppenny philosopher. He regarded himself as a Pragmatic Realist, who saw his wife as a compulsive scandal-monger and gossip who hid her love of interfering in people's lives under the cloak of Theosophy and her commitment to what she called 'Matters Spiritual'.

Ian frowned at the fish drowned in white sauce on a plate far too big for this poor dead thing, once so happy in the sea beneath their keel. Unfortunately for him, Ian was both intelligent and sensitive. He knew that he would soon be dead. Everything he saw or experienced had a flavour of the End Times. So he stared at the fish and thought his thoughts.

To be brought to attention by Myra attempting to initiate conversation with Hazel. 'I hope you don't mind me asking', she asked, knowing the answer, 'but are you related to Dora Grant?'

'She's our aunt, father's sister', she answered, observing that Ian preferred his own meditations to participating in social niceties.

'I thought so,' she said, 'I play bridge with her and she mentioned a nephew who could be travelling with us.'

'Oh yes', she said without interest.

'Yes, she suggested we might have something in common...do you play? –'

'No'

'Perhaps this voyage is the perfect opportunity for you to learn...you and your lovely brother! You two are *bound*, you know.'

'Bound to what?'

'No no dear', she laughed, 'I am a psychic you see.' She grasped a hand too slow to slip away. 'Heavenly twins darling, bound together life after life...do you feel it dear?' she asked, turning to Ian and reaching for his hand.

'No', said Ian and collapsed into a foetal position on the floor, arms cradling his exploding head.

Hazel dropped to her knees, gripped by terror. (Mannie sotto voce to Myra 'I do hope he's not infectious!' Myra to Mannie 'Don't be silly you stupid man') A steward rushed over. The ship's doctor officiously demanded an explanation of symptoms and syndrome. 'No no please,' Hazel said, 'I know exactly what to do – just help him to our cabin ...'

Moaning Ian was laid into his bed. Hazel fetched a morphine ampoule, expertly popped the top off and filled a syringe. The Goldbergs watched in silent admiration as she rolled up her brother's sleeve and sank the numbing liquid into a vein. 'He'll sleep' she said and motioned them out of the cabin, following them out into the passageway.

Wordlessly they climbed the stair to the deck where Hazel began to weep. Myra's motherliness gushed up in her and she tried to put an arm around the girl's shoulders.

'Fuck off!' Hazel expostulated and the Goldbergs fled.

*

Ian and Hazel Grant sat on Sheraton chairs in a panelled room, at the receiving end of a vast carved oak desk. At the business end sat Sir James McCullough in a tweed jacket and plus-fours, which showed off what he considered to be his magnificent calves. He looked a bit like a music hall refugee with his bushy moustache and thinning hair.

'Well', said Sir James, 'the matter is not simple. It never is in these cases. The tumour is far advanced and the location makes it rather – uhm – inaccessible.'

'But can you operate?' Hazel asked. She glanced at her frowning brother who was pretending to be somewhere else.

'I won't mince words with you', the famous man replied, 'an operation would be extremely dangerous young lady. I am reluctant to undertake it.'

'I have a great deal of money here with me' Hazel said.

I'm as good as dead already, Ian thought.

Better alive and bankrupt than lose him, Hazel thought.

Oh goodie, the surgeon thought.

*

'Your brother is dead', said Sir James McCullough as he swept into the waiting room, brushing his hands together as if trying to remove dust.

*

Hazel in Victoria Station. Men in bowlers, men in khaki, women in soft flowing things and there were fox furs. The colours were: bright orange, pinks and pastel blues, red and dust. The sounds were echoey clanks grind puff and the subdued chitter of conversations. Sometimes someone shouted, or Cockney voices chopped the air. She felt as if she were fighting her way through soup, her straw hat cutting a path through it and insulating her from the confusion. Frightened alone girl with a mourning band on her sleeve.

How dare it be summer.

I loved him so much. I still love him. I love a bloated rotting body....no no, that's not Ian, what am I going to do where am I going, how could he desert me I can't go home

Not yet

Hello, Hazel

'What?'

'It's me, silly, where on earth do you think you're heading off to?'

'Ian? Ian! Where are you? You're – *dead!*'

'What was it that stupid woman said? Bound? We're *bound*, honey! Bound for where? You didn't think you could get rid of me so easily did you?'

A porter grins mischievously at the pretty girl talking to herself, who slips behind a news kiosk

'This is FABULOUS,' Ian's voice chatters on in her head. 'There's no pain! The operation worked. I've found the best cure there is for pain. Death! I'm bounding with delight!'

'Very funny'

'So, where are we bounding off to?'

'I really couldn't face going home'

'Well, don't! Let's go on a Grand Tour. You know, like Byron or Queen Christina of Sweden or –'

'What about father and the family? They will be expecting me to come home....'

'Oh you don't want to sit around with all that misery and crying and carrying on. They'll only depress you. They won't ever be able to understand how happy I am!'

'Well...'

'Oh come on Hazel. We didn't come all this way not to see something of Europe!'

'...I hardly have any money left after your funeral and the medical expenses....'

'How much?'

She counted. £27 7s 6d. Then she went to the ticket office and bought a single one way on the Orient Express First Class to Paris. Then she went to the telegraph office and sent a carefully worded telegram to her family in Johannesburg: HAVE ARRANGED BURIAL STOP WILL RETURN IN TWO MONTHS OR SO STOP NEED TIME TO RECUPERATE STOP

READ THE REST – LASZLO'S MILLIONS IS NOW AVAILABLE IN KINDLE AND PAPERBACK FROM ALL GOOD INTERNET BOOKSHOPS!