



Café SINISTER
BY BEN HECHT

ILLUSTRATED BY MARTHA SAWYERS

Café El Granada — showcase for wealth, photographers' heaven, breeding ground of gossip and intrigue—spawns a revenge too long delayed, in a memorable tale told by a master

ALWAYS in a café of elegance where the elite come to advertise their boredom I feel the promise of sinister events. My years as a newspaperman still make me think of the fashionable and the famous in terms of derogatory headlines. I never enter one of these hot-house roosts without feeling immediately that around me are the important scandals of tomorrow.

Here they sit—in the ornate anteroom of suicide, bankruptcy and blackmail, aglitter with the spoils of life, including, that last most dangerous treasure: ennui. You would never fancy that these toy-faced heroes and heroines of the city's night were anything but what they seem—a group of beribboned insomnia victims come to stare at one another and exchange yawns. But this is a deception. For in these moribund huddles sit beauty, talent and wealth. And, however bored they seem, you may be sure that where such sit, there is always devil's music playing near by.

I have a friend, Dr. Mortimer Briggs, who is a Haroun-al-Raschid sort of psychiatrist. He is given to wandering the city after midnight and peering into its psychoses and, perhaps, looking for customers.

This soul gazer assures me that his favorite haunt, El Granada Café, is the most clinical spot in town, and I have

taken to haunting it with him. My interest is chiefly Morty, who is a witty and instructive companion and who has the gift of making the dulllest people blossom into werewolves and moon monsters—a side of psychiatry that has always pleased me.

In El Granada after midnight, says Morty, assemble the demon-driven of the town—the rich, the brilliant and the beautiful. The rich, he tells me, have warped souls—all of them—as a result of exercising their egos rather than their wits. As

for their playfellows—the men and women of the arts—these are in an even worse situation. For only successful geniuses can afford to bask in El Granada, and medically, says Morty, there is nothing as troublesome to genius as success. It substitutes press notices for dreams and cocktail parties for the pursuit of beauty. Fame, holds Morty, is a sort of mummy case in which the creative talents of yesterday lie in state and glitter with mania.

As for beauty, my friend's theory is that

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all the lovely ladies who bloom nightly in El Granada are more phantom than female. They are, he says, shallow and dangerous. They are designed, like mirages, only to stir hunger and arouse the imagination and they have no food to offer either.

In the months we have been squatting almost nightly in El Granada, that ornamental caldron has yielded the press four suicides, one murder, fifteen divorces and innumerable lesser items involving bigamy, treason and embezzlement. None of these events actually happened in El Granada, but its violent actors were all recruited from its yawning tables.

It was while sitting with Doctor Morty in this Pandora's box of a café one night that I witnessed the debut of the Baron Corfus, and with it the opening scene of a drama as fantastic as any in the Arabian Nights, and one that fulfilled in abundance its promise of sinister events.

There was no hint of macabre enterprise about the tall, pottery-faced gentleman who made his first entrance that night. It was midnight—an hour at which

El Granada is so crowded with men and women of distinction that it is practically impossible for anyone to achieve the slightest attention.

The arrival of an elegant-looking elderly man wearing a camellia in his lapel and accompanied by a beautiful girl in camellia-studded furs is a matter of no more import to El Granada at midnight than the squeezing of two more shoppers into a subway train during the rush hour. The fact that Ganzo, the headwaiter, himself conducted the pair to a reserved table was no clue to the importance of the newcomers. It indicated that a twenty-dollar bill had changed hands.

THUS it was that the Baron Corfus and his companion created no ripples with their entrance. I remember well, however, that Morty was quick to bag the newcomer.

"Never saw him before," he said, "and the girl is new, too."

"Not bad looking," I said. You have to be modest in your opinions in front of Morty or he explodes. Psychiatry is basically the science of contradiction."

"Strip her, scrub her face and comb her hair out," said Morty, "and you have a slight case of pituitary emaciation plus a bit of narcissism."

"She still looks like Salome to me," I said. "Do you think that red hair is real?"

"The hair is real," the great scientist admitted grudgingly, "but the eyes are of

glass. The man is vastly more interesting."

"He looks well preserved," I said.

"To the contrary," said Morty happily, "he is in the last stages of disintegration. A well-dressed case of cachexia always looks like a visiting diplomat." Morty mopped his face with one of his many handkerchiefs. Though not a fat man—as psychiatrists go—he was in a constant perspiration, and regardless of the temperature, seemed always either to be choking to death or about to be laid low by the heat. He performed this mopping operation with quick and furtive gestures as if he expected nobody to notice the oddity.

"Besides," he went on, "that man has too much poise unless it's arteriosclerosis." Morty changed handkerchiefs. "A very curious fellow—that fellow."

I shall describe the new arrival as I saw him this first time. He was a man so embedded in an attitude that his age seemed a mystery. The attitude was one of charm and aloofness. The gray face with its long jaws, its thin lips, its enameled gloss was raised as if it were in the midst of some performance. He had metallic-gray hair that was curled tightly on his skull and seemed to have been polished rather than combed. But the man's eyes were his chief attraction. They were almost tight shut. The eyelids were lowered as if against a glare and the eyes were reduced to two glittering lines—like the dashes in a code.

"I'd say he was almost blind," Morty

went on slowly, "and the squint is a ruse for increasing his small vision. Or else—"

"Or else, what?" I asked, humbly.

"Or else," said Morty, "he's as mad as a hatter. A man closes his eyes like that for one reason, usually. He doesn't want to be seen. I call them ostrichomaniacs." Morty considered this a joke.

"That's a queer theory about a gentleman who seeks out a spotlight like El Granada," I said.

"It's his soul, not his camellia that's in hiding," Morty answered.

THE music resumed. El Granada was filling up for the night, which meant that the fashionable and the famous were being reduced to sardinelike postures that made drinking, talking or eating well-nigh impossible. Dancers inched about on the small floor. The service grew panicky, breathing difficult.

Baron Corfus had added himself to this ensemble as if it were his natural element. At one-thirty the newcomer rose to leave. Morty and I automatically called it a night. Together with some twenty other frolickers bored to a point of nervous collapse, we squeezed our way out of El Granada. I wondered idly as we stepped into the life-restoring street who the elderly glassy-faced dandy in front of us was and what type of insomnia had brought him to our roost.

An elegant automobile drew up to the curb. The baron handed Ivan, the door-

man, a five-dollar bill for his single bow and entered the car with his lovely redhead.

"A very strange fellow," said Morty. "I hope we see more of him."

We did. In the weeks that followed, El Granada had produced a new diversion for us—a mystery man.

Mystery is not a thing that happens quickly. It is the negative side of events, the blank curtain concealing drama. You must look at this curtain a long time before even becoming aware that it is hanging in front of you. Having located it, however, you have a front seat at the greatest show on earth—the Unknown.

The Baron Corfus—headwaiter Ganzo had supplied his name—became our show—more Morty's than mine. For while I was content to enjoy knowing nothing and imagining everything, like any good mystery fan, Morty was busy with solutions. The trail, said Morty, after several weeks of studying furtively our camellia-tipped dandy, offered several scents. For one thing, the unvarying midnight entrance and the unvarying departure at exactly one-thirty A.M. was the sort of ceremonial behavior, said Morty, that revealed mania. Since my friend managed to discover lunacy in practically everybody who came under his scientific eye, I was not too impressed.

"The difference in this case," said Morty, "is that here we have lunacy in action. We are all lunatics, but inert ones. Psychic duds, so to speak. But the baron's mania is up to something. It's performing for us. It's plotting away every night."

"Plotting what?" I asked modestly.

"That, I don't know," beamed my Sherlock, "but I will soon. All we know now is that the baron arrives here with ceremonial regularity on the stroke of midnight with a beautiful young lady in whom he has no interest and we have also the fact that our baron, a tireless exhibitionist, nevertheless refuses to commune with any of the customers here."

We had both observed that our mystery man had frozen off a dozen neighborly attempts at conversation. I attributed this to jealousy of his companion.

"Nonsense," Morty answered. "Definitely the baron is not jealous. He's just busy and doesn't care to be interrupted."

"Busy doing what?" I asked humbly.

"Hiding," said Morty, "and plotting."

IT WAS I who first noticed a few evenings later that the baron had a different young woman with him. His new friend—in addition to wearing the same camellia-studded furs, the same fingernails and the same fixed glow of an enchanted window dummy—was also a redhead.

"Well, we've got a new clue," I said. "We've found out that the baron has a redhead fetish."

"A putrid deduction," said Morty. "A man who keeps his eyes shut isn't going in for color fetishes. The redhead is a coincidence. Or perhaps a drug on the market." But I could see that Morty was not too impressed by this notion.

A young naval lieutenant squeezed into a chair at our table. This was Dickie Malchen, one of our night-life alumni who had wheedled his way into the landlocked sector of the Navy.

"Hiya," said Dickie, "I'm on leave again. First free breath in five weeks. Ever been in Washington in the summer?" The young mariner shuddered. "There's nothing worse on earth than that Navy building."

"War is war," I offered. I had never

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Marie arranged to meet Malchen across the Austrian border. But he was not waiting for her. Instead a group of Gestapo agents seized her and took her to Berlin



Victorious American soldiers survey the twisted mass of metal that once defiantly flew the insignia of the Luftwaffe at the captured airfield of El Ouina. Left: Major Gen. Lewis Brereton, who was greatly responsible for the devastation wrought by Allied airpower in the North Africa theater, is shown here with Frank Gervasi

ROBERT CAPA



BY FRANK GERVASI

RADIOED FROM CAIRO

s Africa was won, so Europe will be won. Sooner, perhaps, than you dared hope. The lesson is plain—bombs can reduce armies to impotence, and already American airpower is rapidly widening the straight road to victory that carved out in African skies

THE Liberators were bombing Tobruk, Marshal Erwin Rommel's principal intake port for supplies and reinforcements for his Afrika Korps. Rommel watched the raid from a hill above the wreck-filled harbor of the crumbling town. It was months before Cape Bon but, on that starry night of October 25th, Rommel knew he was beaten.

He saw 500-pound bombs blast the quay. He saw them demolish dockside dumps of stores his Italian lackeys hadn't had time to remove. A bomb hit and sank an Italian destroyer. Port installations, already badly damaged, were nearly obliterated.

Until then, Rommel had been able to land approximately 4,000 tons of supplies daily at Tobruk. When our bombers finished with the port that night its capacity had been reduced to possibly 400 tons. The Afrika Korps was deprived of nearly all the guns, shells, food, tanks, spare parts and water it needed to fight the war.

It was also deprived of two commodities more precious than any of these—gasoline and oil, the blood and plasma of motorized war. Through the futile pyrotechnics of his antiaircraft batteries and the glow of fires ignited by American bombs, Rommel watched a tanker try to cut herself free of the dock and run for open water to escape the bombs. The ship twisted, turned and churned the black harbor waters. But the last bomb from the last Liberator over the target found her amidships. She blew up in a geyser of red and yellow flame.

Captured German officers who were with Rommel that night said the marshal turned his head quickly from the spectacle as though, at last, the hard-bitten old sol-

dier had seen something truly ghastly in war. Rommel muttered bitterly through set, thin lips, "My last tanker," and German staff officers saw for the first time how one of their greats looked in defeat.

Rommel had lost many tankers in the previous weeks. His stocks of aviation gasoline were dangerously low. His Luftwaffe remained on the ground. He couldn't, during the months of May, June and July of last year, hurl the Luftwaffe against the trucks, tanks and men of the British Eighth Army as it choked that single escape road from Gazala to El Alamein. He couldn't send it into the air now to meet the waves of American heavy and medium bombers hacking mercilessly at his supply lines to Sicily and Italy, Crete and Greece. Rommel was out of gas.

No Power Without Gas

Desperately he signaled Berlin. He demanded planes, fuel and pilots. Many of the latter were sent to him from the Stalingrad front. Germany was making its most vigorous and costly single effort of the war against the Russians at the moment, but so urgent had become Rommel's need that weary young pilots were flown from the Caucasus to Greece, thence to the western desert to his aid. We shot down a few. They were grateful. They'd had enough. But though Rommel received some pilots and a few planes, he never got his gas. The Royal Air Force and Ninth United States Air Force under Major General Lewis Brereton, embittered veteran of the debacles in the Philippines, Java and Burma and founder of the Tenth Air Force in India, saw to that.

It was this force (born in those critical days one year ago when the enemy came

within a taxi ride of realizing his grandiose dream of African empire) that provided the bulk of the strategic airpower that gave the Allies their African victory. They say that the Battle of Africa was won at El Alamein and at the Mareth line. That is only partly true. That's where the armies met on the ground and the generals matched tactics and one emerged victorious. But to believe that the Battle of Africa was so won is to commit an error in logic and to ignore or at least minimize the power of the one weapon that can win this war quickly. Even at this late point in the war—there's reason to believe from indications here in the Middle East that we are at least in the early afternoon of total victory—there are hidebound traditionalists who regard the airplane as an auxiliary weapon. If this traditionalism weren't translated into shortages of planes and spare parts where they are needed, it could be ignored. But unfortunately that isn't the case.

American Air Forces in the Middle East, from what I've learned by talking with mechanics, oil bowzers, engineers and others in a tour of our bases that took me as far west as Tunisia, are still stepchildren of war in the Mediterranean. They need planes, they need spare parts and equipment of all kinds. That they've attained and held dominance of African and Mediterranean skies is a monument to American ingenuity and tactical genius in actual combat.

In the rush to worship those who won the spectacular victories on the ground in the Battle of Africa, the role of the Ninth Air Force in support of the British was unfortunately submerged. What happened was comparable to the tendency to

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