My Name is Legion

A.N.Wilson

PART ONE

ONE

There had been no witnesses, but it was easy enough for the police to reconstruct what had happened. Whoever perpetrated the outrages – the attack on the delivery boy, the unlawful entry, the thefts, the threatened assault on Mrs Mark herself – must have been watching the house for several days. They would have seen the same delivery boy, on the same motor-scooter, arrive from the same large Knightsbridge shop at the same front gates on three successive afternoons.

Granville Stoppard did not reckon to operate a takeaway or same-day delivery service; but Mrs Mark was Mrs Mark, and this had been an emergency. Okay, she had agreed on the first day it happened, she was ringing after the Food Hall had closed. Surely that did not stop the fool of a man from getting her a pint of milk. And while he was about it – lobsters. Three lobsters. A dinner party? What the fucking hell had it to do with him if she was giving a dinner party? As it happened, the lobsters were for her husband to eat in the bath before they went out to dinner. Oh, and she had run out of cigarettes.

More to the point, she had run out of servants. So, the first day, and the second, and the third, Granville Stoppard had been on hand to supply Mrs Mark and her household needs. They would not open up the Food Hall after hours for Everyone. But Mrs Mark was Someone. And the manager knew what view would be taken in The Daily Legion, The Sunday Legion and Gloss if the capriciously ordered deliveries were not supplied. No lobsters (whether or not available after the closure of the Food Hall), no semi-skimmed milk, no Dundee cakes and Vacherin cheese ('My husband likes to spread Vacherin on Dundee cake') and it was easy to imagine the damaging publicity which would ensue.

Mary Much, the editor of Gloss, would plan the long-term damage: articles in the opinion-forming glossy dismissing Granville Stoppard as the John Lewis of the new millennium, a place for suburban aunties, where the truly chic would not have been seen dead. Meanwhile, in the women's pages of the Legions, Daily and Sunday, articles would remind readers that only has-beens went to Granville Stoppard. The

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paid gossip columnists – 'Creevey' of the Sunday, 'Dr Arbuthnot' of the Daily – would bristle with stories of famous people closing their accounts at Granville Stoppard. It was even possible to imagine them commissioning L.P. Watson to write one of his 'outrageous' columns about the venerable old store. The manager would not put it past them to infiltrate reporters from The Daily Legion, posing as members of the human race, to enter the shop as customers and engineer situations in which they had been insulted by the lift boy, ripped off at the parfumerie or kept waiting inordinately long in Accounts.

Easier by far to send off the required lobsters and milk – at seven p.m. the first day. She had the decency, on following days, to ring slightly earlier with her requirements. On the day that the delivery boy was attacked, she had added a cold chicken to the order at the last minute, two jars of pickled herrings, and not just Dunhill cigarettes. She wanted menthol. No – as well as Dunhill. As well. As well. Did not the fool know English? Menthol as fucking well. She knew that the Food Hall did not stock cigarettes. This she had been told on the first day and the second, but if a motorbike-rider did not have the intelligence to stop at a corner shop and buy forty menthol cigarettes was it any wonder the country had become a fucking laughing-stock in the world? Oh, and bread – they needed bread. What kind of bread? What kind of a question was that? Brioche, sun-dried tomato, pain au chocolat, any of those, anything except fucking wholemeal, which gave her husband the squits.

Ahmet Hussein will not play a large part in our story, though strangely enough, he too had his connection with the world of The Daily Legion. His father, Ali Hussein, a newsagent in Crickleden, rose early each morning to slice open the bales which were dumped on his doorstep by the wholesalers' vans. The Legion was his biggest seller, and it was the newspaper he read himself. In future, Ahmet – aged eighteen when the attack occurred – would always feel queasy as he watched his father hump the heavy parcels of newspaper and jab with the Stanley knife at the plastic tapes which bound them.

As he was able to tell the police, after he had been treated at the Chelsea and Westminster, Ahmet had parked his Honda City Express (50 cc) beside the kerb in the leafy street, Redgauntlet Road, SW7, somewhere behind the Brompton Oratory. Darkness was falling. It was about four in the afternoon. He took the plastic bags containing lobsters, cold chicken, pain au chocolats, pickled herring and menthol fags from the plastic tub on the back of his moped and approached the twin brick pillars which sustained the ten-foot-high reinforced gates. On the previous days, he had rung the buzzer and spoken into the entryphone. He was just about to do so on this afternoon when an arm came from the shadows behind him and he felt something sharp prick his throat.

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It was somewhere in the Brompton Road that a passer-by stooped to find him. Before that, he had run, then staggered through half-lit streets, feeling blood and the capacity for coherent attention drain from him. He passed out in the gutter. They never were able to find his ear, but – though he carried a scar in his throat for life – the wound came nowhere near his jugular. As a nurse remarked in Casualty, he'd been lucky. The doctor who gave evidence to the police said it was almost as if someone had been playing. Whoever manipulated the knife would appear to have shown, not pathological violence so much as heartless frivolity.

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