

*This is taken from a handwritten manuscript by Stass Paraskos in the possession of the Paraskos family. It was reproduced in full in the book *In Search of Sixpence* by Michael Paraskos (Orage Press, London, 2016)*

## §20

**20th July 1968:** In Larnaca, Cyprus. Mary, the children and myself went to explore the town. I wanted to see what had changed. St Lazarus Square has changed a lot since old days. The long lean columns and colonnade has gone and the giant gate to the south of the church has been demolished. An ornate plaque tells us this modernisation has been carried out at the expense of one of the hotels on the square, which just happens to give residents at the hotel an uninterrupted view of St Lazarus Church.

We headed to the beach where Margaret and I went for a walk and found sixpence in the sand. I used it to buy Margaret an ice cream. Martin and Christine joined us at the beach. Martin was wearing a shirt and his swimming trunks but no trousers. He sat on a stone for five minutes, then took his shirt off and walked two or three yards into the shallow sea to a point where the water covered his feet well below the knee. He sat down, wet his trunks, got up, and then very slowly walked out again. He put his shirt on, lit a cigarette, sat on the same stone for a few minutes more and went home again. Martin had been for a swim.

## §21

**21st July 1968:** I woke up very early and sat listening to a music programme on the radio. An unstamped envelope addressed to “Mr Paraskos Ici” was thrown in under the floor. No doubt an abusing letter I thought.

It was only a note from Martin which ran like this:

“Dear Stass (my business partner).

A list of things I need:

1. Typewriter for a day or an evening.
2. Anthology of modern Cypriot poetry, to translate.
3. The Archbishop.
4. Rimbaud’s mountain.
5. Paphos.

Other things possibly later.

We must get this book right (a) to produce a good book; (b) to possibly produce a best seller to make our fortunes. I sharpen my pencil, half way.”

## §22

**22nd July 1968:** Martin and myself went to Nicosia early to hang my exhibition. The pictures were already hung so we spent the time drinking in different places. We even had two very expensive beers in the Hilton.

By 5pm Martin was very drunk. I wasn't so bad because I did not drink as much and also because of a neurotic anxiety I get every time I have a new exhibition.

We went back to the gallery to wait for the guests and the Minister of Education, who was to open the show with a short speech.

On the right hand side wall as you go through the main entrance to the Hilton Hotel is an instrument which looks like a telephone except that instead of the receiver it has a hand microphone attached to it. I pointed it out to Martin who immediately picked it up and announced, 'I am here!' Seconds later a uniformed bellboy came running towards us. Martin said he wanted to see the manager. When the manager arrived Martin said that we had spent the whole day preparing a good exhibition for the benefit of the hotel and its customers. Now it was the turn of the manager to do something for us. Martin put forward three demands on behalf of both of us: first that the manager shows

us where to have a bath; second that he sees that our shoes are shined; and third that we have two free drinks. Each.

The manager gave us a professional smile, showed us where to have a shower, promised to see to the rest of our needs and disappeared. Next time we saw him was three days later when we went to check if we had sold any paintings. We did not remind him of his broken promise as concerned the shoeshine and free drinks.

Martin went for a shower and I for a three shilling coffee (tip included). When we met again we discovered that Martin had lost his last six shillings. We both went to the showers looking for it, but some bloody millionaire staying in the hotel must have found it first.

## §23

**26th July 1968:** In the evening Martin and me were drinking beer outside Xenou's. After a few pints Martin announced that he was taking Christine to town for a week, excused himself and went to collect her from their house across the road. A few minutes later I saw them walk together towards the town. 30 to 40 yards away Martin lost his balance and then went from one side of the road to the other hitting walls and hedges. When he went to collect Christine he must has swallowed a bottle of brandy in a matter of minutes. Both Martin and Christine hide bottles of brandy in the house. I think this is done to protect each other from excessive drinking, but in reality it just means there is a lot of alcohol around for them both to drink.

## §24

***1st August 1968:*** One the plans before we came to Cyprus was that Martin and me would live in a monastery for a week. It was time to pay a visit to one of these monasteries to see what they are like. We chose Stavrovouni, which is visible from our street and is only 25 miles north-west of Larnaca on top of a 2000 foot mountain. We hired a taxi that drove us up the primitive and dangerous road. On arrival we were greeted by a notice at the entrance which informed us in Greek and English that entry to the monastery was strictly prohibited to people not decently dressed. "No lipstick, no short sleeves and no short trousers" the sign read. The monk in charge offered to lend Martin and Christine long sleeved shirts but we carried jackets and jumpers in the boot of the car and put these on. Despite the heat Mary put her overcoat on. Martin spent all his time up there feeding about fifteen cats with cheese, much to the disgust of two peasant women. Later at lunch Martin disappeared to the toilets. He was gone a long time and after a while Christine went to find him. When she returned she said Martin had lost his tool in his trousers and couldn't urinate.

## §25

**3rd August 1968:** I went to collect the pictures from the Hilton for my next exhibition in Larnaca. I could only carry about half of them in the taxi. I was told that one of the paintings was bought by the Ministry of Education for the Presidential Palace but I did not know which one. A few days later I went to Nicosia again to fetch the rest of my paintings. A message said that if I take the painting bought for the President to the Palace I will get paid. My inquiries to find out which one it was proved that I had already taken it to Larnaca a few days before. I promised to bring it back when the exhibition in Larnaca was over.

My exhibition in Larnaca was opened in the Four Lanterns by Mr Demetriou, the Minister of Commerce and Industry, who comes from Larnaca. Very poor attendance - mostly children. The only fun I had out of the show was from a little scandal. Neither the Mayor nor the members of his City Council showed up as they should have done, this being the normal thing when a cabinet minister is performing a function.

Some people thought the Mayor was offended because he was not invited to open the exhibition himself. But I joked that I thought a more likely explanation was that I had sent the invitations

to the wrong place. In the back of my mind I wondered if my joke was true, but later I was told these eminent local dignitaries refused to appear because I did not invite them personally. Apparently the Mayor said: 'I found a little card on my desk. Do you call this an invitation?' Some people said he went fishing instead, and that the starting of his motorboat was timed to coincide with the Minister's speech.

I was standing next to the Minister while he was making his speech when Paulo came to join me and asked very loudly: 'What is he talking about?' As I wasn't paying attention to the Minister I could not tell him.

## §26

***8th August 1968:*** Martin went for a swim and nearly drowned. He had to be carried ashore by two men.

## §27

**12th August 1968:** We all went to the cinema and saw *The Long Arm of the Law* which we enjoyed enormously. But all the way home we had been closely followed by six youths who were making remarks about Christine and Mary which spoiled our conversation and our enthusiasm for the funniest scenes from the film. We pretended not to notice them although my blood was boiling with anger. At some stage I heard Martin ask Christine in a whisper whether he should scare them off with his schoolmaster voice. This alarmed me because two of the youths were almost twice the size of Martin. Apart from this we had the children with us and there was nobody else about at that midnight hour.

However we continued our walk without incident until we came to our house. Martin's place is only about 100 yards away from mine but we are separated by a corner. When we branched off I thought all the thugs followed Martin and Christine, I rushed Mary and the children in and turned around to see if the rest of the company was all right. To my uncontrollable anger I saw one of the youths standing opposite my house under a street lamp. Automatically I picked up a large stone from the ground, shouted in Greek, 'Did you have a good look?' and threw it at him with all my might. I missed,

but I made him run towards the others, with me right on his heels in hot pursuit, armed with two more of the stones which abound in our unpaved street.

When I turned the corner I shouted to Martin, 'Catch the bastards,' at the same time discharging my load of stones and swearing violently. I saw Martin make a move but they were too fast for us and escaped towards the beach. Poor Christine, who did not realise what was happening, was terrified. When she saw them running she thought they were making an attack on her and Martin.

In the meantime the whole neighbourhood woke up and people came out in their pyjamas and underwear. Others were looking out of their windows.

After we were assured by the neighbours that thugs like that will not be allowed in the neighbourhood any more, we went to sleep. But in the confusion I failed to inform Christine of this assurance and next morning I heard that she sat up all night with the strong stick by her side waiting for an assault.

## §28

*14th August 1968:* Martin, myself, Stanley and Margaret went to town to send a telegram to Kevin Crossley-Holland of Macmillan's: 'Desperate money. Telegraph Arts Council grant.' Before we returned, we checked to see if any of my pictures had sold. We found the gallery was open but in darkness with all the curtains drawn and lights out. Gave up hope of any sale. Very depressed.

The front page of a local newspaper carried a photograph of Mr Roy Jenkins, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, over a caption saying that he is holidaying in Kyrenia and that he is staying in the Dome Hotel. Martin suggested that we go and see him and ask him to cash a cheque for us. Perhaps we could hire a photographer to take photographs of him which we could flog to a British newspaper. My idea was to send him an invitation to the exhibition. On this last idea, not requiring travel and expense, we acted immediately. I asked the hotel receptionist for paper and an envelope and wrote a short note to Mr Jenkins.

Mr Jenkins and myself are not complete strangers. He was the Home Secretary in 1966 when two of my paintings were seized from a Leeds exhibition by the police and I was accused and

subsequently convicted of indecency under the Vagrancy Act.

After my conviction I wrote to the MP Tom Driberg giving him the facts of the case and he kindly took the matter up with the Home Office. A few days later he wrote saying, amongst other things, that: 'I feel sure that had the decision to prosecute or not to prosecute been within the discretion of the Home Secretary there would have been no prosecution.'

'The main positive thing which Mr Jenkins said was this: I am to let him know when you next have an exhibition of your paintings in London, and he will make a point of coming along to see them.'

In my invitation note I reminded Mr Jenkins of this episode.

## §29

**16th August 1968:** 7am, visited by Martin. He had telegram from Kevin Crossley-Holland saying Arts Council is contacting him directly. I expressed the fear that this money will not arrive before we leave the island. But Martin disagreed and said that it will be here any day, probably that same day. He proceeded to tell me about his excellent economic prospects for the next few days and composed a number of telegrams he was despatching to different good friends in London who were going to rush to the rescue. This ritual happens every time he wants to borrow a pound.

We went to Xenou's grocery shop and made three telephone calls. First one to the bank: did they have any money for Mr Bell? The answer was no. Next call to the gallery. Did they sell any pictures? The answer was no. And the third call was to Hilton hotel in Nicosia: did they receive the money for the picture sold to the Ministry of Education? The answer, once more, was no.

Martin wondered aloud how much credit could one have at Xenou's and ordered a pint bottle of beer. He had no money at all and I was down to my last 30 shillings, although I tried to give him the impression I was completely broke. In our depression we drank the beer very quickly and

Martin ordered several other bottles which stood open on our table. He said he feels insecure if he sees only one bottle in front of him. Then he confided in me that Christine did not have anything to eat for the previous 24 hours. He himself could take hunger, but Christine.... She is such a good girl and, apart from her teeth, very attractive too.

I could see tears clouding his eyes and I felt embarrassed. Tears from a grown man always make me feel uncomfortable. He went on to tell me that he met Christine on a visit to Edinburgh. She was already living with a man, but when Martin got back to London he sent her some poems just the same. He said the nasty boyfriend made her write a very rude letter to him which caused her to break their association.

Some time later there was a poetry festival at London's Albert Hall. He went there hoping to meet her and, miraculously, did meet her in the bar. After that they went off and stayed together.

He asked if I knew how he had met his first wife. He said he went to the Duke of York, a pub off Charlotte Street in London, for a drink and met this girl who said she was pregnant. He liked her, so he told her, 'Okay, I'll look after you.'

Her baby was a girl and later she had another daughter, this time with Martin. They had an agreement between them that they should stay

together until the children grew up. This made him work as a teacher for 20 years, hating every minute of it. His wife's ambition on the other hand was to become a teacher herself. The strange thing was that, in the year they separated, he gave up teaching while his wife had qualified and got a teaching job.

When he told his wife about Christine she said that it was a typical case of an old man falling in love with the young girl. He is 27 years old than Christine and 10 years older than his wife.

I lent Martin a pound and immediately he went home. A few minutes later he came back and finished his beer.

## §30

**17th August 1968:** Mary and myself went to Nicosia to take the President's painting hoping that we might meet him. At the Hilton Hotel, where we went first, we were presented to a Mr Pavlos who said he would take the picture to the presidential Palace himself. He also took with him a receipt he asked me to sign saying I had received the sum of £60. Half an hour later he returned and with a serious expression informed me that there had been a mistake. (I assumed the worse). The price of the sold picture in the exhibition catalogue, he said, was marked for £75 while on my receipt I put £60. Since the Archbishop had already authorised payment of £75 do I mind accepting that? I said that I did not mind at all and that the last thing I wanted to do was get anyone into trouble. He paid me, and Mary and I went to town for a double lunch each.

## §31

**19th August 1968:** We all went to the Troodhos mountains by taxi to see where Rimbaud worked when he was in Cyprus. We set off from Larnaca at 7:30am and arrived at about 12 noon, after two stops. Martin was drunk and slept part of the way in spite of the noise from the children.

15 miles from Larnaca we ran over a snake crawling across the main road.

On arrival we decided to look up Mr Pefkios Georgiades, an architect we met at my exhibition who is working for the Ministry of Education and is on holiday with his family up there. We had some difficulty finding his bungalow because there are quite a few of these government residences spread on several hills. They are lent to civil servants for their vacations.

Another difficulty was that we did not know our friend's rank and since protocol was observed in allocating these houses we did not know where to look for him. The higher ranks in the service stay nearer the summit, with Government House, which Rimbaud helped to build, standing high above them all for use by the President and senior ministers.

Luckily we met our friend outside a shop which sold everything from toys to coffee and alcoholic drinks. He was pleased to see us and

bought drinks all round. He also suggested we should stay a few days, so we paid our taxi driver and sent him back to Larnaca.

We went to our friend's place for lunch. The table was laid under a group of high pine trees and he barbecued meat for us on an open fire built outdoors. My son Paulo said he was not going to eat mucky meat cooked in that way and the other children made similar remarks. But the meat was delicious and the rest of us ate with great appetite. In fact, for a couple of hours, we ate everything our friend could produce as soon as it came from the fire.

We also drank a lot of his excellent wine, except Martin who drank brandy and a very strong alcoholic drink made in Cyprus called zyvania. That was a mistake. Suddenly Martin decided he wanted to go home. He was offered a bed to rest for a couple of hours but insisted on going home to sleep in his own bed. Luckily Christine was able to get him inside and put him to bed where he fell asleep. Free from Martin the rest of us went exploring and we found a hotel called the Jubilee that gave residents the choice to sleep inside in its rooms, or outside under the trees in tents. We chose the tents.

Unfortunately the time we chose to visit our friend was not happy one for him. His wife, who was pregnant, had suffered a haemorrhage a few days

earlier, and had only got out of bed on the day of our arrival. A little son of his, who suffers from a very serious illness, caught cold and was complaining of a pain on the left side of his waist. Our friend's elderly mother was also ill and kept going to bed for a little rest every half hour or so.

Our arrival clearly did not make things easier for them. Our kids are noisy and very curious with other people's property. Coffee was spilt, cakes and biscuits eaten, and antique plates were broken. When Christine informed everybody that the toilet was broken I felt ashamed and offered to try and fix it. 'I'm very good at this sort of job,' I said.

Christine and the children followed me and we crowded the lavatory to capacity. It seems that that a link in the mechanism that controls the water supply to the toilet had broken off and disappeared down the drain. Of course I could not fix it and fearing more disaster I suggested we cut our losses and head for the hotel. Christine went to wake up Martin but he would not come out. He wanted another brandy and a cigarette. Christine came out to borrow my matches. In my mind's eye I imagined the little house going up in flames.

There was no fire, but Martin's demands increased and his language became stronger. He would only go to Leeds and to no other place he insisted. In the meantime three of the children had

disappeared into the forest. I thought if I take a walk while waiting for Martin's decision as to whether he would get out of bed or not, I could look for the children. It was getting dark and Mary was worried.

Passing round of the side of the house I saw through a window our friend's wife struggling to mend the toilet. I moved on quickly. The children were not to be found anywhere. I shouted out their names and searched until I was exhausted, but no use. Mary and our hosts joined the search.

Some time later Christine came out of the house, but she was raging with anger, swearing and cursing Martin. He humiliates her and makes her violent, she said, everywhere they go. She suggested that I go and shout at him to get out, or else we could just drag him out by his hands and feet. I declined both ideas and suggested instead that Christine join the search for the children. All the while Martin could be heard shouting for her and cursing.

The missing children were found half a mile down the hill playing by a stream. When we got back to the house it was 7pm and Martin was still in bed. Christine was still eager for me to go into the bedroom and shout at Martin, and by now I was very annoyed at all that had happened and was ready to quarrel with him. I marched into the bedroom and said, 'Martin we've got to go now.' Without a word of

protest Martin jumped up from the bed with the word, 'Right!'

On the veranda I apologised to our hosts for all the trouble we had caused and thanked them for their hospitality. As we were driven to our hotel I noticed Martin carrying a large bottle of brandy he had somehow acquired from the house.

When the hotel management gave us the choice of staying indoors or out, we chose two tents outside, one for Martin and Christine and the other for Mary, myself and the children. After dinner we all went straight to bed at 9pm, and I was hoping for a long sleep in those peaceful surroundings after the trying day. But it wasn't to be. Martin, having slept most of the day, drank his brandy and talked to himself or to Christine right through the night. This did not seem to stop any of the children sleeping as soon as they hit their beds, but it was impossible for me.

After some maddening sleepless hours, I left the tent and walked up a hilltop where the only sound I could hear was the lovely breathing of the pine trees. There I slept on the ground until dawn. I watched the moon go down and then the sun rise before I went back to the tent. I also made a decision: never to travel with Martin Bell again.

At noon we went to the centre of the small resort to get a taxi back home. Pefkios came to say

goodbye and we learned that his wife was losing blood again. This made me take another decision: not to speak to Bell again.

## §32

**21st August 1968:** Early morning visit by Martin. He wanted me to ring up the bank to see if his money had arrived. He was so drunk that he could just about stand on his feet. Together we went around to Xenou's shop where the telephone is and rang up. There was no money. Martin ordered drinks and suggested that we go to town and send a telegram to Charles Osborne of the Arts Council to see what is happening. I agreed.

Anthony Vernis, an old school teacher of mine and a friend, came to join us. Conversation turned to the events in Czechoslovakia, which was invaded by the Russians. We decided to send a letter of protest to a newspaper. We composed several, some in Greek and some in English, and signed them. But we could not decide how to describe ourselves; were we 'Communists', 'ex-Communists', 'Marxists', 'moderates', 'liberals', or what? Martin declared himself an ex-communist and a music critic, and signed himself accordingly. Following his lead I declared myself an anarchist and an artist and we ordered more drinks. We stuffed the letters in our pockets ready to post, but they remained there until the end of our stay and were never sent.

Suddenly Martin remembered that a 'certain party' was bullying him and so he wanted to borrow

a pound to take to her. I obliged and Martin disappeared with my money for the rest of the day.

## §33

**22nd August 1968:** I went to the beach with the family. An hour later Christine came to remind me of an arrangement I had with Martin to go to town to see if the money from the Arts Council had arrived. Martin also needed some shoes, and to send telegrams to Charles Osborne and Peter Porter.

Martin was supposed to be waiting for me on the steps of my house, but he was not there so I went to his place and found him lying on his bed stone drunk. He must have drunk a bottle of brandy in the half hour between Christine leaving him and my arrival.

Christine made several attempts to get him up, but he would not move. I saw her getting angry and went across to Xenou's for a drink; I did not wish to witness the scene. From there I could hear shouting and fighting.

When the bus came I shouted Christine to leave him alone and that I could do the job by myself. She came to the door and I saw that she was in tears.

Later I wrote a letter to Peter Porter for whom Martin has a special affection:

Dear Peter.

Our journey is beginning to turn into a nightmare. Martin has been drunk at all hours of

every day we have been here and you can imagine what this has done to his health. He begins the day with brandy before sunrise, turns to beer, then onto ouzo and back to brandy again at night. The only break from drinking he has is during the few hours he sleeps. As for food, he doesn't touch it unless Christine forces him to.

All this leads to fights – sometimes violent – between himself and Christine which is not doing any good to anybody's morale and dignity. He has weakened himself so much that even going to the local cinema by taxi makes him tired.

Another complication that makes things worse is a serious shortage of money. All he received since we arrived was a small sum from Leeds University. I have lent him about £100 which was meant for my fare back home, and so now I am broke myself and also stranded. For this reason I have written to my bank asking for new fares in spite of an agreement I have made with them that if I needed to borrow more I would leave immediately for England. Martin and Christine have paid for their return fares but they need extra cash to pay some bills they have run up. They also need spending money for the journey home, which takes six days. Do you think you can hurry the Arts Council to send the £200 they have promised him?

I hate to alarm you but I think that the sooner we leave Cyprus the better. Martin has promised to see a doctor about his alcoholism as soon as we return.

Regards to your family.

With all respect,  
Stass Paraskos

## §34

**23rd August 1968:** My ex-teacher Anthony came to see me this morning and brought two judges from the law courts and their wives with him. One of them, Judge George Pikes, comes from my village and is the youngest judge Cyprus has ever seen. He is also a relative by marriage, having married my cousin last month. They left with two pictures, both bought by Judge George, who said he will send the money with Anthony. With the opportunity of this visit I also gave his wife a framed drawing as a wedding present.

Afterwards, Martin and I paid our daily visit to the bank to find out if his money had arrived. Martin was in his slippers because he had no shoes. There was no money at the bank and so we went to the Larnaca Taverna on the seafront and drank beer. Martin talked to me about 'The Group', a poetry society he had helped to start, but he confided to me that he had been very treacherous to the other members. After he got what he wanted (he did not specify what, but I understood that this was Christine) he dissolved in the group.

I was amused to hear Martin say this because all the other members of this group I have ever met seemed to me to be smarter, tougher and certainly more successful than he has ever been.

Some are now well-known personalities in the world of criticism and journalism.

A group of young women passed by and I remarked that one of them looked like somebody we know. At this Martin turned down the edges of his mouth, showed his front teeth and after a pause said he would kill me if I slept with Christine. His mouth always takes this shape when he becomes emotional. My son Stanley says Martin gets it from the cats that seem to be attracted to him when he sleeps and of which he is especially fond. I protested that I am not in the habit of sleeping with my friend's wives, no matter what the temptation.

This incident did not surprise me much because I know Martin to be very possessive where Christine is concerned. On several occasions when we have sat drinking on his verandah he has insisted on Christine going to bed with him when he was unable to continue, just so she would not stay up with me. At other times, when Christine was on the beach, and we sat outside Xenou's, he would interrupt his drinking every so often to go and see what she was doing. Once he even told me, with some malice, that Stanley, who is 11 years old, is in love with Christine.

On leaving the Larnaca Tavern Martin was too drunk to walk home and so we crossed the road to catch a taxi outside the hotel where I had my

exhibition. As we passed by the wife of the owner saw me and called me to say that I had a letter. It was from Mrs Roy Jenkins thanking me for the invitation to her husband and regretting that they couldn't visit Larnaca to see my pictures because their stay in Cyprus was short and the drive to Larnaca too long.

As soon as we got back to my place Martin proceeded to finish off a bottle of ouzo he had left there before we went into town. I read two letters I found on the table. One was from my bank manager in England saying he was not in a position to meet my request for more money until my overdraft was paid off. The other letter was from Eric White of the Arts Council. Every time this good man writes to me he gives some friendly words and cheerful information. This time he said that Martin's confirmation letter had been sent and all Martin had to do now was to write back to say he accepts the grant he has been offered. After that a cheque will follow.

I tried to make Martin write the letter of acceptance to send to the Arts Council but he said he was not in a writing mood. Instead he drank some more ouzo and fell asleep on the chair. Christine tried to wake him up but it was no good. We decided that I should write a letter and get him to sign it in the morning. With Christine writing and I dictating we began like this:

Dear Sir.

I am very grateful to the Arts Council...

At this Martin jumped up shouting that he is not grateful to anybody and swearing violently against us, the Arts Council and the ever-gentle Eric White. In this state he managed to find his way out of my place and disappeared up the street. A few moments later we heard him scream, like somebody being attacked. Christine ran out after him saying he has fallen down again.

In the evening Martin came to see me. From his fall he was badly cooked on the forehead, nose and around a blood-red left eye. His upper lip was also swollen and he looked in a terrible state. He wanted me to go round to Xenou's to buy him a bottle of ouzo because in the condition his face was in he did not dare go himself. I said I'll do it if we write the letter to the Arts Council. He answered that he would write the letter if I buy the ouzo first. We compromised: young Stanley would go for a bottle of beer which we'd drink while writing the letter together. As soon as he had finished writing the letter I promised I would go for the ouzo. And so it was done.

We posted the letter in the little yellow postbox round the corner and then all sat down to celebrate this event with ouzo and beer, drinking

until well into the night as though it was a major achievement.

## §35

**26th August 1968:** Martin's face is terribly swollen. He refuses to see a doctor on the grounds that his powers of recovery are enormous. We talked at length about three new cat friends he has made. This was a day of the cats. First thing in the morning the children and I found an abandoned kitten on the beach. Stanley put it in his inflatable rubber boat to try to get it around some rocks in the sea, but it managed to fall overboard. The little thing looked terrible and was shivering when we fished it out and got it safely to the beach. Word was sent to Christine and she came running with some bread for it to eat. Then she left only to return a few minutes later with a packet of butter. She sat on the sand, the kitten in her lap, dipping her finger into the butter and feeding the cat.

Later she was joined by Englishwoman in a bikini whom we had seen on the beach several times before. We knew her vaguely and called her the army wife because she was the wife of an English soldier serving at the British base. Eventually the army wife picked up the kitten and said she was going to take it home with her. As she passed by me she stopped and asked if I had been trying to drown it. I tried to explain the accident but it didn't sound convincing. When she had gone Christine said the army wife had

taken the cat because she had said we could not be trusted to look after it properly.

That evening we all had dinner in the yard of a small restaurant called the Garden of Allah but a more appropriate name would have been the garden of cats. Half a dozen of them sat begging at our feet during the meal. Martin also brought up the subject of his three new cat friends several times. ‘Duckie, it breaks your heart to make friends with cats and then to have to leave them.’ All evening Martin, Christine and the children had a great time playing with the restaurant cats, to the great annoyance of Mary who saw a health hazard in handling and feeding dirty animals with the same fingers one uses to eat.

Christine remarked about a large ginger tomcat sitting on the restaurant wall. Martin said there was no such thing as a ginger tomcat – all ginger cats are female he said. Christine accused him of being dogmatic. In a small place like Cyprus, she said, where cats inbreed like mad, everything is possible. Martin pleaded that even if that is true she must not demolish a view he had held for over twenty years. The argument went on, Lasting until the end of a very long dinner.

## §36

**27th August 1968:** The house next to Xenou's is owned by a man named George. He has a long record of prison sentences for political crimes, like singing *The Internationale*, marching without permission and protesting outside government offices. Every night he sits outside Xenou's shop and tell stories of his adventures if there is an audience who will listen; if not he just sleeps on his chair. He does not drink or smoke because he has stomach ulcers, but Martin has grown very fond of him and asked him to write a short autobiography which he will use in his book.

While we were sat with George a very pious old woman, whom we see regularly going about her business, came up to us to tell us that she was worried because her employer had asked her to go to work at 6am the next day. This was too early for the first bus, so George, speaking in his best Byzantine Greek advised her to go home, kneel in front of her bed, put her hands together in prayer, and say to God: 'Dear God, who created the fleas to benefit mankind with their warm and nourishing milk, send me Nathaniel's Wings to carry me over to my Englishwoman master.' As I translated the prayer for Martin the old woman walked away cursing George for his blasphemy.

George and Xenou are very old friends and one can see their sympathy for each other is a very deep. But there are arguments as well, especially about prices. Xenou is very forgetful and tends to mix the prices of her goods up. George on the other hand, despite being a communist, is very money conscious and very good at sums. The argument this time was about how much George owed Xenou. George said it was 3/6 and explained why. Xenou insisted it was 3/8 and proceeded to tell him an Aesopian tale about a stubborn peasant like himself. Her story went like this: 'A peasant was walking to his field with his wife when, somewhere ahead of them, they saw what looked like a group of animals sitting under a tree. The peasant said to his wife, "Look at those stray sheep, I wonder who they belong to." The wife replied, "They are not sheep. Can't you see their wings and that they are walking on two legs?" In going a little closer some of the creatures flapped their wings and flew away. "There, you see!" said the wife. "They are not sheep, they are birds because they fly." But the peasant just replied, "I can see they can fly, but I tell you they are still sheep."

## §37

**28th August 1968:** We all went to Kyrenia by bus for the day. We took the long way round, via Nicosia, because the short way has been closed by the Turks. This was everybody's first visit to the celebrated little town. Before we set off I made up my mind not to like it, and I didn't. But neither did the rest of our company.

Passing outside the Dome Hotel Martin remembered Roy Jenkins and went in to see him. Unfortunately Jenkins had left the day before. At least that is what the manager told him, but perhaps he thought Martin was an assassin with his bruised face, dark glasses and breath reminiscent decomposed pickled peppers.

Martin was already drunk by this time having spent the journey drinking from a small bottle of brandy. As we walked from the hotel towards the beach Martin fell down, hurting himself again, and had to be helped to his feet. Later, as we waited for the bus to take us home, Martin caused great offence to the other passengers by urinating against a wall in the open-air bus station.

## §38

**31st August 1968:** Within one day I recognised in the street two government ministers and the chairman of the state broadcasting authority, and I managed to secure a promise to be taken to see the President of Cyprus as soon as he returns from abroad. That is how small Cyprus is, and people are still very familiar with those in power. While I talked to the Minister of Commerce and Industry a man passing by patted him on the shoulder and said he would buy him a beer next time he is in town.

At home we received two letters from John, a friend in Leeds, saying he will be arriving in Cyprus on Monday and staying with us for eight days. One was posted in Glasgow and the other in Beirut. This created some panic because this particular friend is a very indiscreet homosexual and a noisy drinker. When he drinks he sings a repertoire of Communist, obscene and religious songs which are bound to contravene the laws on blasphemy or at least upset the locals. In Leeds he also has the habit of taking round to Martin's place every young man he picks up in the local pubs. If he does the same thing here, in this suspicious and nosy neighbourhood, then God help us!

## §39

***1st September 1968:*** Christine and I had some wicked thoughts about John's arrival. Could we let him eat unwashed peaches sprayed with insecticides, or perhaps just give him a dose of mild poison that might incapacitate him for eight days?

At the very least, Christine suggested, we should book him into the most expensive hotel in town so he might run out of money and leave early.

The best suggestion was to manufacture mysterious documents in Greek, plant them on him, and then send him into the Turkish quarter in the hope he might be arrested as a spy.

## §40

**2nd September 1968:** John arrived late in the afternoon. Martin and I went with him to St Lazarus Square in the old part of Larnaca, where we booked him a room at 7/- a night. Then we sat on the veranda of a restaurant facing the church of St Lazarus and had dinner and drinks. Martin and John ate with their fingers and sung *The Internationale* and *The Red Flag* several times.

Halfway through dinner John saw some youths in a coffeehouse across the street playing one of those abominable games on an electrified table and went to join them. I feared he was about to create an incident by some indecent suggestion. St Lazarus is an area frequented mostly by peasants from the surrounding villages who have very strong views against homosexuality.

The hypocrisy of Cypriots towards sex is extraordinary. There is an apparent attitude of protectiveness towards the female members of the family but this results in a lack of basic human rights for women, while young men are forgiven and allowed everything they can get away with, except of course any hint of homosexuality. I remember that before prostitution was outlawed in Cyprus teenage boys from the villages would save their money until they had 5/-. Then they would catch the village bus

to St Lazarus Square from where they would run an early-morning and indiscreet race to the brothel in Water Street, much to the disgust of the townspeople. In Water Street they all queued noisily to have sex with the same woman, before returning to the village chewing bunches of parsley which was believed ward off VD.

## §41

***6th September 1968:*** Martin, John and I went to Nicosia to collect a selection of poems Mr Panos Joannides had promised us for Martin's book. Mr Joannides is a Cypriot poet and high official in the broadcasting authority. We were offered drinks – beer and brandy – in his office before an English speaking technician was found to show us around the studios. John touched every switch in sight, so I wondered whether Cyprus would be left without television that night. He also took a liking to a man described has the 'hole maker', which for some reason meant he wrote the subtitles in Greek for foreign films.

Later, at the bus station, Martin was shaking badly and needed assistance to get down the three steps from the bus to the street. We got him a large brandy at a cafe nearby and this seemed to help.

With Martin now in a better state we visited the Ministry of Education where we met our friends Pefkios and Panayiotis Serghis, and were given poems by the Minister's private secretary. Pefkios and Panayiotis took us to lunch in a place full of songbirds in cages. I remembered the last time I ate here one of the cages contained a large black snake.

Over lunch Pefkios asked John questions about his life, and John mentioned that he had been

a scoutmaster. Pefkios recalled the story Martin had told him on our visit to the mountains about knowing a scoutmaster who was a homosexual. Martin pretended not to know anything about the story, but he had told it and it was obvious to everyone that it was about John.

As we said our goodbyes Panayiotis said he'd try to arrange for Martin and me to see the President.

Before heading back to Larnaca we stopped to have a few expensive drinks at the People's Bar in Nicosia. A dissatisfied Martin declared, 'The People's Bar is deepest pink, it's not as red as people think.'

## §42

*7th September 1968:* The comments of some of our neighbours in Larnaca have not always been kind. At Xenou's a woman said, 'I did not see her clean her house in two months,' about Christine. 'And you can smell ouzo when you pass by on the street.' Another neighbour stopped me in the bank and said, 'Your wife allows the children to wander anywhere they like. I suppose that's how Englishwomen bring up their children.'

It is not only the neighbours. When I had my exhibition a newspaper said, 'With Mr Paraskos is Mr Martin Bell, a poet who is writing a book Cyprus, going around the streets dressed like a tramp even though he is said to be a university lecturer – a sign of our times!' We are regularly criticised for being the beatniks of Cyprus.

Mary and I took the family to Famagusta. When we returned our landlady said there was a message for me from the President's Palace at Xenou's. At Xenou's I met another neighbour, a woman who never so much as said good morning before. This time she smiled at me and said somebody from the government was trying to get in touch with me. 'She must think you're being deported,' Xenou said loudly. Then with equal volume so the whole shop could hear she told me

that my friend from the Ministry of Education had rung up to say that President Makarios will see Martin and me on Monday at 11am.

That'll teach them who is a beatnik and who is a VIP!