

**FOURTEEN GHOST
STORIES**

Nicholas Foster

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DEDICATION

For F

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1 THE RUSTLING OF SILK

We were sitting in a private dining-room upstairs at Rules in Maiden Lane, not a restaurant that I could afford. But Harrington had done very well in the City and when it came to his turn to host our annual reunion dinner, it was to Rules we were invited. And a fine dinner it was, leaving all eight of us comfortable and mellow as we sat with our coffees and port. Eight of us, all now in our sixties, thrown together studying History at that small College more than forty years before. Harrington who had always been pushy and direct, Abigail, by far the most intelligent of us, who'd changed to Law in her Third Year and was now a Supreme Court Judge, Giles the newspaper editor, and the rest of us with our less illustrious careers. All of us taken out of our daily lives and allowed, for this one evening, to put our cares to one side and feel young again.

Unsurprisingly, it was Harrington who destroyed this feeling of trouble-free nostalgia by suggesting that it would be a splendid idea if we were all to tell a story, recount a tale, share some strange or curious event. There were a couple of groans and I saw Abigail half-smile as she looked down at the table. Harrington, however, would not be put

off. He'd had an idea and he was going to stick with it. He was proposing to start the ball rolling himself. as he put it, when I surprised myself by interrupting him. Perhaps it was the alcohol or the pleasantness of being amongst old friends. Whatever it was, I'd decided that I might as well be the first with a story.

I have always wondered, I said, why M.R.James never wrote a ghost-story about Cyprus. He worked there, of course, for a short while in 1887 when he joined the excavations at the Temple of Aphrodite at Old Paphos. I think he was responsible for collating the inscriptions they found. I can't imagine him directing a dig, or even wielding a trowel. It's odd enough just to think of him at work on a Classical site. We know him now as a Medievalist and it would make more sense to us if he'd been been working with Camille Enlart, studying and cataloguing the medieval Lusignan buildings of Cyprus. I could imagine M.R.James with one of those old-fashioned surveyor's wooden measures, pacing out the dimensions of the Aghia Sophia Cathedral in Nicosia. I assume he must have visited Nicosia and Famagusta to see the Lusignan Cathedrals and the other medieval churches there. But if he did, for some reason they never made it into his ghost stories.

I was reminded of M.R.James and his brief stay in Cyprus by something I was once told by one of my postgraduate tutors, Professor Somerville, when I moved on from History to Archaeology. For, as a young postgraduate student himself, Somerville had spent a year in Cyprus in the early 1950s, working at the Nicosia Museum. It was before Independence, before the intercommunal fighting and before Partition. It was a time when you could travel anywhere there and Somerville did, and like M.R.James, by bicycle.

Cyprus and the Cypriots had made a huge impression on

Somerville. It was his first year in the real world, I guess, and the defining year of his life. Whenever he was happy in all the years I knew him, he'd start to reminisce about Cyprus. And his memories were as sharp, clear and bright as the sea and sunlight of the island. Which, I suppose, is why the story I am going to tell you now is so unusual. For it was a uniquely disturbing anecdote from his wonderful year in the early 1950s. And one that he would probably never have told me had it not been for his first heart-attack at College which came out-of-the-blue and jolted him. I remember going to visit him in a cubby-hole room in hospital where he lay on his back recovering for a week and reflecting on his first and unexpected brush with death.

It was a different Somerville I found that afternoon on a grey, November Cambridge day. There were no jokes or wit, just a sombre thoughtfulness. I remember him smiling as though he was looking at me from a long way off, with an understanding I did not have. He gestured for me to sit down on the chair beside his bed and then unburdened himself, I think that's the best way of describing it, of a Cyprus story I'd never heard.

He described, or tried to, the afternoon heat of July to September in Nicosia, the way all life stopped, having no choice, the silence of the tired and deserted streets. For it was precisely these dead, afternoon hours when all was in limbo, that he would get on his bicycle and head off to the coolness of the great Lusignan Cathedral, Aghia Sophia, now the Selimiye Mosque with its two minarets added as a victorious after-thought to the great medieval cathedral. Riding past the closed shops with their metal shutters pulled down and padlocked, he could feel as though the town belonged to him alone. It made him feel privileged as well as happy.

Arriving at the mosque, he'd prop his bike against the

stone wall of the washing area. At the huge wooden cathedral doors (for this could be nothing but a cathedral), he'd kick off his sandals and put them down in the empty space where the faithful would leave their shoes and then he'd walk into the silent, empty cathedral.

The Lusignan walls, once covered in paintings, were now a uniform expanse of whitewash. The high windows which once held stained-glass were now filled with tracery, allowing the breeze, if there had been one, to blow through. The only sound came from the pigeons on the roof, ruffling their feathers like the quiet rustling of silk on a stone floor. But the cathedral's stone floor with its few remaining flat, broken tombstones of knights and clerics, was now completely covered with faded but valuable Turkish rugs, laid down any-old-how and overlapping, adding a strangely homely touch to the otherwise austere and looming interior. It was as if the cathedral had been domesticated and was just waiting for the van to arrive with the sofas.

But this was where Somerville would come for coolness in the dry, burning heat of the Nicosia Summer afternoons. And the more often he went there, the more he began to feel the true solemnity of this space, as though the carpets and the whitewash had gone and he was back in the 15th Century in the final years of Lusignan rule, before the Venetians secured Cyprus through marriage and then lost it to the Ottomans in violence.

And it was on one of those afternoons when he'd just propped his bicycle against the wash-shed, that he was stopped in his tracks by a shadow against the wall near the cathedral door, for all the world like a short, stocky man sitting in the shade. But the shadow disappeared as soon as he got close to it and there was nothing unusual about his quiet walk inside the cathedral. Just the blankness of the whitewashed walls and that gentle sound of the rustling

of silk as the pigeons fluffed up their feathers on the window-sills so high above him.

Which was why he was unprepared on his next visit, to see the same shadow by the door rise up from the bench as he approached, putting out its hand to stop him. The man's strong arms were bare from the elbow, covered in the scars of old knife wounds, a fighting man on his feet now and blocking the path. But, as Somerville stood there uncertain and scared, the man or the shadow were gone. There was nothing there but the blank stone wall and no bench for a man to sit on.

Hurrying inside the cathedral, Somerville realised his nerves were still on edge. For when silently walking on the thick Turkish rugs, he could distinctly hear the same rustling of silk from the pigeons. But this time the noise came from in front of him, not above, and there were no pigeons inside the cathedral. He stood for a few minutes listening to the rustling sound, taking deep breaths to calm himself down as he sought some rational explanation for this trick of the acoustics. He couldn't find an answer, and he was relieved when he was brought back to reality by the sound of one of the shopkeepers from the hardware stores outside.

The man had obviously decided to re-open early for Somerville could hear the thump as a heavy sack was tossed down onto the pavement from the back of a lorry. Cycling home in the heat, he shook his head at his own stupidity. He had arrogantly thought he was immune to sunstroke and had laughed when his Greek-Cypriot landlady had insisted he should take a siesta "like all good people".

For the next week or so he was busy with his work at the Museum. They had a visit from London from the British Museum and Somerville was on-duty every day taking the

visitors to Classical sites from Polis to Paphos to Salamis. It was only after a break of ten days that he had a free afternoon and could cycle back once more to the cathedral. He'd compromised with his landlady by wearing a sun hat, although this still didn't seem to satisfy her. A siesta was a siesta and, in her view, an almost medical requirement. For him, a floppy green bush-hat was a concession in itself and it made him feel more confident as he cycled through the backstreets towards the cathedral.

But the stocky man was there again by the door, his face in shadow, and Somerville could see what he hadn't seen before. That the man was wearing a tough leather breastplate over his rough cotton shirt and that there was an evil-looking dagger thrust in his belt. Not the distinctive dagger the Cretans still wore, but something long and thin and more lethal. A poniard they might have called it in the Middle-Ages. And once again the man stood up to bar his way, shaking his head as if to confirm that entry was forbidden. Only to fade away as Somerville approached, leaving nothing behind but what looked like a farthing coin under the bench where he had been sitting, had there been a bench there for him to sit on.

Somerville, ever the archaeologist, quickly picked up the coin and ducked into the cathedral. Where he was not alone. For when he turned around when he was half-way across the cathedral floor, he saw an old woman in black, whom he hadn't noticed when he entered, sitting just inside the cathedral door. At first, he thought she was knitting, but then he could see that she was telling a rosary made of pink glass beads, the kind a young girl would give as a present. But, on second sight, she too was gone and he was left with nothing but the persistent sound of the rustling of silk, like a silk dress trailing across a stone floor. Until that too disappeared, reality returning with the same shopkeeper tossing his heavy sack from his lorry. The only puzzling thing was that, when Somerville left the

cathedral, he couldn't see which shop had re-opened.

He was happy, though, with his 'farthing'. For the next day at the Museum, Professor Loizides identified it as a sixain of James II, James the Bastard, as he was known, the last Lusignan King. Somerville donated it to the Museum and the small coin was duly catalogued with a note on the card describing it as a gift from C.H.Somerville Esq, found in the dust in front of the Selimiye Mosque. For the Classicists at the Museum, the 15th Century Lusignan coin was more of a curiosity than anything else, but Somerville felt he'd done something of value.

The next time he went to the cathedral, he had to admit that he was nervous. The acoustics and the tricks of the light in the cathedral were unsettling. It was no longer somewhere he could feel at peace. He went back, he guessed, for the coolness and for the chance of finding something else in the dust outside. He was used to kicking up fragments of yellow and green sgraffito ware Lusignan pottery in the empty city of Famagusta, but to find a coin in Nicosia where people had walked for centuries was unusual. It was worth another try

And he knew he'd made the right decision when he walked up to the cathedral doors and there was no shadow of a man to stop him. It was just a normal, hot afternoon in a sleepy, quiet city with "the good people" like his landlady all safely taking their siesta.

Inside the cathedral, he took off his bush-hat and tucked it in his belt making that rustling sound as he did so. It seemed that any movement in the cathedral might be misconstrued by the acoustics. But turning around, he could see the old woman was again sitting by the door. This time she stopped telling her pink glass beads and looked at him, or past him at something further ahead. He couldn't see her face which was lost in the shadow of the

black cotton shawl around her head, but the way her hands were frozen in her lap suggested fear.

And her fear communicated itself to him, for he could now hear clearly the rustling of silk and see that it came not from the pigeons but from a young girl, seventeen at most, slowly pacing the cathedral in a fine silk dress which trailed along the stone cathedral floor over the faces of the long-dead knights and clerics. And all around him there was sudden bright colour, as though a real world had rushed in to fill a vacuum. The walls were brightly painted in blues and reds, the colour poured down from the stained-glass windows and the vault of the choir was now Heaven, a brilliant bright blue, studded with golden stars.

Turning around in confusion, he lost sight of the girl until he suddenly heard the rustling behind him and felt the light touch of a thin hand on his shoulder. He heard the words “Pardonnez-moi” in a young girl’s voice and wheeled round to look into her face, or into the void where her face should have been. He was about to gasp for breath when he heard the same deep thud of the heavy sack being tossed down on the ground outside. This time, however, there were screams, from the girl and from the old woman by the door, but both of them had disappeared by the time their screaming was done.

Somerville raised himself up in the hospital bed and reached out to take a sip from the glass of water on the small table beside him. We sat there in silence for a while staring out of the window at the grey, November sky, a world away from Nicosia in high-Summer and several worlds away from those events in its cathedral.

The historian in Somerville had made him write the story down, however improbable it might seem, however ridiculous it might make him look. He gave me a copy, but he admitted he didn’t have an answer for what had

happened.

Years later, when that second manuscript of George Boustronios's Chronicle resurfaced in a monastery at Mt Athos, an explanation of a sort did appear. Somerville by then was dead, but I'd kept an interest in the period of James the Bastard as a hobby because of Somerville's strange story. This second manuscript contained additions to Boustronios's Chronicle and life of James the Bastard, additions written by one Petros Kouklianios, a priest from near Paphos. In the few extra paragraphs he'd added, Kouklianios touched on some more of the scandals of that turbulent period at the very end of Lusignan rule. In one paragraph, he briefly referred to a nobleman's daughter, married off at fourteen (as was the custom) to a much older man for reasons of family advantage. There were few places a nobleman's daughter might go with her maid and her bodyguard, but the cathedral was one of them. And it was there that she met a young priest/confessor with whom, in Kouklianios's polite language, the girl had "formed an attachment". The story ended when their secret was betrayed for money by her bodyguard. One day, he left his post at the cathedral door and her husband's retainers stormed in to drag the priest up one of the octagonal staircases to the roof, taking him out onto the flying buttress from where they tossed him like a heavy sack onto the pavement below. They sent the girl to a nunnery where she gave birth to a boy six months later. They killed the child and threw it down a dried-up well. Kouklianios doesn't record what happened to the mother.

"Dieu pardonne" is all one can say. I hope she is at rest.

2 THE COMRADES

I think we'll have trouble following that, said Abigail, smiling at us as we sat in that upstairs dining-room in Maiden Lane, eight former History students, now in our sixties and still meeting once a year for a reunion and to tell a ghost story or two. The after-effects of the story we'd just heard hung in the room like cigarette smoke and even the normally loquacious Harrington seemed unusually quiet, speaking only to order us another bottle of port.

A good story but a bit erudite for me, said Giles, but then I don't suppose any of you read my paper. It would be a bit down-market for you, a tabloid. Not that I blame you. But the one thing that working on the tabloids does teach you is how to tell a story, and quickly. You don't get the column inches of the broadsheets. You've got to hook the readers in the first sentence and keep re-hooking them in every paragraph till the brief roller-coaster is over.

The problem, though, like all journalism, is that there are some stories you can't tell. Not because they're not well-sourced or because you can't check them out, but simply

because your readers would take one look at them and decide you had a screw loose.

You don't mind if I smoke, do you? We did but we were all too polite to say otherwise. So Giles brought out a pack of Rothmans, tapped one out and lit up.

My first boss in Fleet Street got me onto Rothmans, he said. In those days the office was just a fug of cigarette smoke, with a deeper cloud in the corner where our chief crime reporter sat with his pipe. My boss, though, was Rothmans and a chain-smoker. It was he that taught me pretty much all I know about journalism and it was he who showed me that, once in a while, there comes along a story you just can't publish. For your own sanity, I suppose.

My boss had been in on some of the big stories of the Fifties when he first started out in Fleet Street. Sex scandals, spy scandals, the lot. He had a track-record and we all looked up to him. He had a sure grip, sound judgement and a confidence in his abilities that radiated out to the rest of us. He was a real leader and it was a good paper, if not one that any of you, my friends, would have read.

I only once remember him ever looking flummoxed by anything. It was when one of our best reporters took off to Barcelona unannounced with a staff photographer in tow. The latter started phoning back to say something was wrong. My boss got hold of our Madrid stringer and sent him up there to check it out. The stringer got to Barcelona and had a few quiet drinks with the photographer on expenses, as stringers do. The photographer said that he thought the reporter had gone mad. The stringer then spent a day going around with the reporter gently teasing out what was going on. It turned out that the reporter had got a tip-off, from an Archangel apparently, that Christ's Second Coming was due within

the week. It wasn't clear why Christ had chosen Barcelona, but an Archangel is a pretty good source. Not surprisingly, that reporter never worked in Fleet Street again.

And he was one of my best reporters, said the Boss to me later, shaking his head sadly. It was a week or two afterwards and I was standing with him in his office in those dead hours after midnight when the presses had started rolling. He brought out a bottle and two glasses from his desk and lit up another Rothmans. You think I'm tough, he said, but it always bloody scares me, the fragility of the human mind. And I bet that's not the sort of phrase you'd ever hear me say, he said laughing. Sit down, have a drink. I'll tell you about one of my greatest triumphs.

Have you ever heard of the Baxter suicide in the early Fifties? That's right, the up and coming Labour MP who filled his pockets with stones, like some sad wronged woman, and threw himself off Westminster Bridge early one morning "just as the sun was rising". There were long columns of speculation in the papers but no-one ever knew what was behind it. Except me, of course, I got the whole story, neat and tidy and all cross-checked. It was a scoop that could have kick-started my career a lot earlier. But I couldn't publish it for the simple reason that my Editor would have had me sectioned.

It was before your time, I guess. Baxter was one of those upper-class Englishmen with a glowing war record and a young wife who looked like a film star but who had a lot more going for her. She ran a Charity sorting out housing for ex-Servicemen. She was a real power in her own right. He'd found Socialism while serving in the Army. He'd been with Tito's Partisans in Yugoslavia. Baxter and his wife were the great hopes of the Labour Party. He was already set to become a Minister and she looked ready to

join him as an MP herself. I think his suicide put an end to her political ambitions. She just seemed to lose all heart in it. And that too was a tragedy. All-in-all the Labour Party might have turned out a lot stronger if he'd lived.

So you can understand why every young journalist in Fleet Street went hurrying off to dig up the truth behind the Baxter suicide. All of us could see there had to be some pretty big story there and our Editors were breathing down our necks for results. You know what it's like when there are a dozen or more of you from different papers all going hell-for-leather after the same story. However hard you try, you can't keep the others from getting a sniff of your leads, of getting some idea of what you're up to. I'd been through his war record, found some blokes who'd been with him in Yugoslavia. Baxter had worked for one of the secret mobs in their offices in Bari. By the time he went into Yugoslavia, it was by motor torpedo boat and he was passed like a package all the way to Tito's HQ to join the others already there. It wasn't like the early days. Parachuting on your own at night to land God knows where and to find God knows what. I'm not knocking him. It's just that he went there late in the day. It was all fairly organised by the time he went in.

I'd then tried all my Labour Party contacts, gone through them with a fine-tooth comb. From a couple of them, and from what I was picking up from the slip-streams of my rivals from other papers, it seemed as though we were probably looking at another spy scandal, Baxter and the Russians, which the Government was going to do its best to cover up, not wanting to admit what it had lost. That was the line I was working on when I managed to get close to an electrician doing some rewiring work on Baxter's house. He had a couple of kids and was a bit short of cash. He liked to place too many bets as well, I think. Anyway, we soon came to an arrangement. He'd bring me an envelope of letters and bills from the late Mr Baxter

MP's writing desk each evening. I'd give them the once over, pay him and he'd put them back the next morning. Little by little, we got through the lot.

It didn't help much until, two nights running, my electrician friend's envelope contained two polite letters from a professional typist in Muswell Hill. It seemed she'd done some unspecified work for Baxter and not been paid. I don't know why his wife or the police hadn't followed it up. A stone they just didn't want to turn over perhaps, for fear of more scandal? Anyway, I put on my best shirt and tie and turned up at the Muswell Hill address claiming to be a solicitor's clerk from the Law Firm handling Baxter's estate. I was there to settle unpaid bills. The money wasn't much. I paid it and she was happy. It seemed he'd wanted a manuscript typed privately. She still had both the typescript and the original. He'd told her it was a work of fiction. He didn't want anyone to know about his amateur literary efforts until he'd decided if it was any good. So there I was on the bus back from Muswell Hill with a large brown envelope of Baxter's private thoughts which I'd duly paid for, above board so to speak. The strangest bloody document I've ever read.

Here you are, he said, unlocking the bottom drawer of his desk and tossing over a thick and aged envelope. Some weekend light reading for you. Don't show anyone else. Bring it back when you've finished and I'll tell you how I managed to check it out. Not that it did me any good.

I took the Boss's envelope home, turned on the three-bar heater in the sitting-room, made myself a large mug of coffee and read on through the deep dark hours until the first birds had started singing. The manuscript was written as a Diary, with dates, and it ran for about nine months, ending a few days before his death. It wouldn't have been a great work of fiction, it was too repetitive, but it would have been good enough to pass muster as fiction with the

copy-typist. Baxter must have delivered it to her as something to be going on with, and she'd assumed that they'd be more to come. I'll leave out a lot of the description and just give you the gist of it. He'd added a title in pencil, almost as an afterthought for the typist's benefit:

THE HAUNTING

I can't say for certain when it began. But I've put down this date when I had to go up to Birmingham to give a speech. It was early afternoon when I got onto the train. It was a quiet time of day and I found a compartment to myself. And it stayed empty for the whole journey. A couple of times at different stops, someone on the platform reached out to open the door but for some reason they turned away at the last minute. I guess I was just lucky. My only complaint was the strong smell of Woodbines from whoever had been in the compartment on the way down. I tried opening the window, but the stink of Woodbines only seemed to get worse. It was only later that I realised what was happening...

I was having lunch with the Minister of Trade. We'd agreed to meet at 1pm in the House of Commons dining-room. His Secretary had booked a table for us. I got there on the dot to find the Minister was already seated and having words with the Head Waiter. The Minister had picked up his linen napkin only to find an angry-looking dirty-red wine-stain on the white tablecloth. He showed it to me as I arrived, asking whether I too thought standards were slipping. There was something very strange about it. It wasn't from the sort of stemmed wineglass we used in the Commons. It was more like the red stains from cheap glasses I'd seen on rough wooden tables abroad when I was travelling before the War...

I was travelling to Paris for an international Socialist

conference. As it happened, my birthday was going to be on the second day I was away. My wife had given me a wrapped birthday present to put in my suitcase. She always gives me a book for my birthday. I confess that I cheated and opened it when I was on the train from Calais to Paris. She'd written a card saying she hoped I'd like it. She'd seen it well-reviewed. It was apparently the best study so far of the damage done by Colonialism in Africa. Only it wasn't. The book was, in fact, a very battered dirty copy of a 1930s Left Book Club title, one of those solid paperbacks with the bright-orange covers. It was scuffed and frayed as though it had been a long time in someone's pocket. It was when I saw the owner's name on the flyleaf that I realised what was happening to me...

By now, I admit that my nerves were on edge. I know it was beginning to affect my work. My wife knew that something was wrong, but I put it down to tiredness, which she accepted. She then started talking about how we should take a holiday, get away from London if just for a few days. She had a good deputy she could trust at the Charity. It wouldn't be a problem. At the end of the day, it was your health that was important. We were none of us going to live for ever. I'd agreed but without fixing a date. Instead I'd taken up smoking again to try and steady my nerves and stay sane. I was smoking Rothmans which was why it was such a shock, when I finished a packet, to see an old cigarette-card of an actress tucked down inside, issued not by Rothmans but by the United Kingdom Tobacco Company Ltd. No.26 from a series of 32 'Cinema Stars', Dolores Del Rio...

I didn't know where the next one would come from. I didn't know what places to avoid. All I wanted to do was hide but I didn't know where or from what. They were singling me out, that was certain. I could see the quiet smiles on their faces. But it wasn't a game to them, it was serious and justified retribution. What did they want me to

do? I knew I could never make amends but there must be something I could do. We were all practical people. Surely, they could see that what I was doing now for Socialism was for the good? But perhaps I was wrong about the game. For we were spending the day with my wife's sister and her two small children. A boy of six and a girl of four. It was after lunch and the sunlight was streaming through the windows onto the Persian rug where the little girl was sitting with a toy workbox and pieces of felt. She'd been entrusted with a small pair of scissors with rounded ends which she was using to cut shapes from the material. She smiled and held one up. It was better cut than her others. A red star cut from felt, still with a few strands of cotton where it had been pulled from a soldier's cap...

I wasn't sleeping. I was chain-smoking. I looked terrible. Colleagues in the House would recommend doctors and specialists who'd helped members of their family or friends. One of the Party Whips had started to look at me out of the corner of his eye, as if he'd marked me down as a potential problem. Women, boys, worse? He didn't know but he'd seen that sort of thing before and it was his job to sniff these things out, nip them in the bud if he could. And, if not, then the Party interest would have to come first. I tried to keep my mind off it by working even harder, even longer hours. I'd be sitting there in the small office I shared with two other MPs long after they'd both gone home. The only people still there were the cleaners. One of them, an old Cypriot woman, would take a quiet peak at me round the door, just to make sure I was alright. Sometimes she'd pop in briefly and recommend some Greek folk remedy. One morning, I arrived to find she'd left me a small present wrapped in brown paper. A folk remedy? It was a cheap tin icon with a picture of the saint on printed paper. He was dressed like a Roman soldier, but his face had been scratched out with pencil...

I think I'd had about as much as I could take. It was like being bullied at school but here there were no holidays now to peg out for. Everywhere I went, they seemed to be waiting for me. I could see now that I'd never been strong. I just looked the part and that had got me by. Oh, I worked hard, and in a good cause, but everything about me was built on that one great lie. They knew it and they were not going to let me forget it. The end, of course, came in the most banal of ways. I stopped outside the Tube Station on the way home to buy The Evening News. There was going to be some headline the Whips had been worried about. I hurried down to the Tube and it was only when I sat down on the train that I could see the newspaper-seller had made some mistake. Instead of The Evening News, he'd given me an old copy of the Daily Worker. It was crisp and white and had been lovingly ironed as though it was The Times delivered on a silver tray in an upper-class Victorian household. It was the very neatness of the folds and the pressing that were so terrifying. I could visualise the hands that would have picked it up and read it. This beautifully folded paper had a finality to it, like a judgement or a death sentence...

And that was where the manuscript ended. Being a good journalist, I checked the manuscript and the typescript for discrepancies, but the lady in Muswell Hill had done a good job. I had read all there was. I resealed the envelope and passed it back to the Boss through his secretary on the Monday morning. It wasn't till after midnight at the end of the week that he called me to come in for a night-cap.

He poured us each a drink and held up his hand when I was about to say something. I managed to check it out, he said, after a fashion and some years later. Put it this way, I met a man who had known Baxter before the War. What he told me made some sort of sense of this 'Haunting'.

My source was a strong man and I liked him and believed him. But he was an alcoholic between drinks and not someone my Editor would have felt comfortable risking the paper's reputation on. And soon after I met him, the drink killed him. So that was that, you might say. My Boss smiled, aware that he'd no right now to keep me on tenterhooks.

Most Newspapers do Charity work as well, you know. It's not just the politicians and their wives. My old paper back in the Fifties used to have a big thing for reformed alcoholics, particularly ex-Servicemen. There were a lot of them on the street at that time. Not being able to find a place in Civvy Street. I was up in Glasgow at a home we were supporting. I met one of their residents, an old-time Scottish Commie who'd been a docker before the War. We were talking about this and that and he asked me whether I'd ever had a scoop. For some reason I mentioned Baxter as one that got away. You could say that, said the old docker, laughing loudly.

It turned out the docker had been in Spain in the International Brigades. He got there in the early days when it was all a bit rag-taggle. He was at the Front in a small group. Six Brits and a Greek-Cypriot who'd joined them because he spoke English. They were looked after by a real soldier, a British Major who kept an eye on them from Brigade Headquarters.

They'd got to know each other quite well in the two weeks of makeshift training before they reached the Front. They'd even been allowed to fire off five or six rounds at tin-cans as target practice. Although most of the tin-cans survived.

In addition to the docker, there was a young lad from Battersea. He lived in one of those terraced houses down near the Power Station and had never left London in his

life. His Dad had given him six packs of Woodbines as a parting gift. He was eking them out to remind himself of home. In complete contrast, there was a merchant-seaman who'd travelled the world and got drunk in every port. When there was no alcohol, he was fine. But show him a goatskin of red wine, or six bottles in a bodega, and you'd lost him for the rest of the day. There was a University lecturer who'd left his job to come to Spain. The Party wanted to use his talents in the propaganda struggle but he wanted to be at the Front. He always had a book in his pocket. He didn't say so himself, but the Major told them the lecturer had published an article in one of those thick monthlies, on Hegel and Marx, the Major said. There was also a real dopey lad who had a heart of gold and who loved animals. He was always looking after the mules. He used to carry a cigarette card in his wallet of some glamorous Spanish actress. He was always hoping he'd meet her when she turned up one day with the other celebrities visiting the Internationals. The Major had a look at the card and told them later that the actress was Mexican and in Hollywood. But he said it was better not to burst the lad's bubble. We all needed dreams to help us get by. There was also another dreamer, a political dreamer. A keen young bloke from Watford. He'd been a Party-member since before birth. He'd even sewed a red star on his beret. But you should have seen him when charging for an attack in the training, said the docker. Out to save World Socialism single-handed. Like a bloody whirlwind, he was. And then there was Panos, the Cypriot. His mother was a Greek from Rhodes. She had an Italian passport, he said, and she didn't know why he wanted to go to Spain. He was Baxter's No.2 on the machine gun. Oh yes, Baxter was there.

Last of all, there was the Major. The old docker got almost dewy-eyed when he talked of the Major. Always striding around with his shiny long boots and his swagger

stick and his handsome young Spanish batman, a good-looking young man, all white teeth and hair oil. The Major was the son of an East End butcher, no better than the docker, but he'd got himself promoted from the ranks to be an Officer in the Great War, so he had what it took. And that was all that mattered to the docker or to the rest of them. They'd have followed the Major anywhere. In Spain, you see, they didn't care who you were or who you were pretending to be. They could forgive all that so long as you showed you had guts and judgement. You needed both to be of any real use there. The docker laughed as he described how the Major would order his batman to iron his newspaper for him, on the rare occasions he got one.

The Major knew what had happened, that Baxter had panicked and run when the Moors attacked, abandoning the machine-gun which would have soon jammed when the Cypriot tried to fire it on his own. They didn't have a hope then, against regular soldiers. The Major knew the docker was the only other one to get out alive. But neither of them had time to report it. They were both hit in the same artillery barrage the next day. The Major died instantly. The docker took six months to recover in hospital and could never go back to the Front. The Party weren't interested in his story. They didn't want a scandal. Cowardice wasn't the sort of story that would help them win wars.

Now you can see why I never got it published, said my Boss.

