

# Death and the Compass

*To Mandie Molina Vedia  
(1942)*

Of the many problems ever to tax Erik Lönnrot's rash mind, none was so strange—so methodically strange, let us say—as the intermittent series of murders which came to a culmination amid the incessant odor of eucalyptus trees at the villa Triste-le-Roy. It is true that Lönnrot failed to prevent the last of the murders, but it is undeniable that he foresaw it. Neither did he guess the identity of Yarmolinsky's ill-starred killer, but he did guess the secret shape of the evil series of events and the possible role played in those events by Red Scharlach, also nicknamed Scharlach the Dandy. The gangster (like so many others of his ilk) had sworn on his honor to get Erik Lönnrot, but Lönnrot was not intimidated. Lönnrot thought of himself as a pure logician, a kind of Auguste Dupin, but there was also a streak of the adventurer and even of the gambler in him.

The first murder took place in the Hôtel du Nord—that tall prism which overlooks the estuary whose broad waters are the color of sand. To that tower (which, as everyone

knows, brings together the hateful blank white walls of a hospital, the numbered chambers of a cell block, and the overall appearance of a brothel) there arrived on the third of December Rabbi Marcel Yarmolinsky, a gray-bearded, gray-eyed man, who was a delegate from Podolsk to the Third Talmudic Congress. We shall never know whether the Hôtel du Nord actually pleased him or not, since he accepted it with the ageless resignation that had made it possible for him to survive three years of war in the Carpathians and three thousand years of oppression and pogroms. He was given a room on floor R, across from the suite occupied—not without splendor—by the Tetrarch of Galilee.

Yarmolinsky had dinner, put off until the next day a tour of the unfamiliar city, arranged in a closet his many books and his few suits of clothes, and before midnight turned off his bed lamp. (So said the Tetrarch's chauffeur, who slept in the room next door.) On the fourth of December, at three minutes past eleven in the morning, an editor of the *Jüdische Zeitung* called him by telephone. Rabbi Yarmolinsky did not answer; soon after, he was found in his room, his face already discolored, almost naked under a great old-fashioned cape. He lay not far from the hall door. A deep knife wound had opened his chest. A couple of hours later, in the same room, in the throng of reporters, photographers, and policemen, Inspector Treviranus and Lönnrot quietly discussed the case.

"We needn't lose any time here looking for three-legged cats," Treviranus said, brandishing an imperious cigar. "Everyone knows the Tetrarch of Galilee owns the world's finest sapphires. Somebody out to steal them probably found his way in here by mistake. Yarmolinsky woke up and the thief was forced to kill him. What do you make of it?"

"Possible, but not very interesting," Lönnrot answered. "You'll say reality is under no obligation to be interesting. To which I'd reply that reality may disregard the obligation but that we may not. In your hypothesis, chance plays a

large part. Here's a dead rabbi. I'd much prefer a purely rabbinical explanation, not the imagined mistakes of an imagined jewel thief."

"I'm not interested in rabbinical explanations," Treviranus replied in bad humor; "I'm interested in apprehending the man who murdered this unknown party."

"Not so unknown," corrected Lönnrot. "There are his complete works." He pointed to a row of tall books on a shelf in the closet. There were a *Vindication of the Kabbalah*, a *Study of the Philosophy of Robert Fludd*, a literal translation of the *Sefer Yeçirah*, a *Biography of the Baal Shem*, a *History of the Hasidic Sect*, a treatise (in German) on the Tetragrammaton, and another on the names of God in the Pentateuch. The Inspector stared at them in fear, almost in disgust. Then he burst into laughter.

"I'm only a poor Christian," he said. "You may cart off every last tome if you feel like it. I have no time to waste on Jewish superstitions."

"Maybe this crime belongs to the history of Jewish superstitions," Lönnrot grumbled.

"Like Christianity," the editor from the *Jüdische Zeitung* made bold to add. He was nearsighted, an atheist, and very shy.

Nobody took any notice of him. One of the police detectives had found in Yarmolinsky's small typewriter a sheet of paper on which these cryptic words were written:

*The first letter of the Name has been uttered*

Lönnrot restrained himself from smiling. Suddenly turning bibliophile and Hebraic scholar, he ordered a package made of the dead man's books and he brought them to his apartment. There, with complete disregard for the police investigation, he began studying them. One royal-octavo volume revealed to him the teachings of Israel Baal Shem Tobh, founder of the sect of the Pious; another, the magic and the terror of the Tetragrammaton, which is God's unspeakable name; a third, the doctrine that God has a secret name in which (as in the crystal sphere that the

Persians attribute to Alexander of Macedonia) His ninth attribute, Eternity, may be found—that is to say, the immediate knowledge of everything under the sun that will be, that is, and that was. Tradition lists ninety-nine names of God; Hebrew scholars explain that imperfect cipher by a mystic fear of even numbers; the Hasidim argue that the missing term stands for a hundredth name—the Absolute Name.

It was out of this bookworming that Lönnrot was distracted a few days later by the appearance of the editor from the *Jüdische Zeitung*, who wanted to speak about the murder. Lönnrot, however, chose to speak of the many names of the Lord. The following day, in three columns, the journalist stated that Chief Detective Erik Lönnrot had taken up the study of the names of God in order to find out the name of the murderer. Lönnrot, familiar with the simplifications of journalism, was not surprised. It also seemed that one of those tradesmen who have discovered that any man is willing to buy any book was peddling a cheap edition of Yarmolinsky's *History of the Hasidic Sect*.

The second murder took place on the night of January third out in the most forsaken and empty of the city's western reaches. Along about daybreak, one of the police who patrol this lonely area on horseback noticed on the doorstep of a dilapidated paint and hardware store a man in a poncho laid out flat. A deep knife wound had ripped open his chest, and his hard features looked as though they were masked in blood. On the wall, on the shop's conventional red and yellow diamond shapes, were some words scrawled in chalk. The policeman read them letter by letter. That evening, Treviranus and Lönnrot made their way across town to the remote scene of the crime. To the left and right of their car the city fell away in shambles; the sky grew wider and houses were of much less account than brick kilns or an occasional poplar. They reached their forlorn destination, an unpaved back alley with rose-colored walls that in some way seemed to reflect the garish sunset. The dead man had already been identified. He turned out

to be Daniel Simon Azevedo, a man with a fair reputation in the old northern outskirts of town who had risen from teamster to electioneering thug and later degenerated into a thief and an informer. (The unusual manner of his death seemed to them fitting, for Azevedo was the last example of a generation of criminals who knew how to handle a knife but not a revolver.) The words chalked up on the wall were these:

*The second letter of the Name has been uttered*

The third murder took place on the night of February third. A little before one o'clock, the telephone rang in the office of Inspector Treviranus. With pointed secrecy, a man speaking in a guttural voice said his name was Ginzberg (or Ginsburg) and that he was ready—for a reasonable consideration—to shed light on the facts surrounding the double sacrifice of Azevedo and Yarmolinsky. A racket of whistles and tin horns drowned out the informer's voice. Then the line went dead. Without discounting the possibility of a practical joke (they were, after all, at the height of Carnival), Treviranus checked and found that he had been phoned from a sailors' tavern called Liverpool House on the Rue de Toulon—that arcaded waterfront street in which we find side by side the wax museum and the dairy bar, the brothel and the Bible seller. Treviranus called the owner back. The man (Black Finnegan by name, a reformed Irish criminal concerned about and almost weighed down by respectability) told him that the last person to have used the telephone was one of his roomers, a certain Gryphius, who had only minutes before gone out with some friends. At once Treviranus set out for Liverpool House. There the owner told him the following story:

Eight days earlier, Gryphius had taken a small room above the bar. He was a sharp-featured man with a misty gray beard, shabbily dressed in black. Finnegan (who used that room for a purpose Treviranus immediately guessed) had asked the roomer for a rent that was obviously steep, and Gryphius paid the stipulated sum on the spot. Hardly

ever going out, he took lunch and supper in his room; in fact, his face was hardly known in the bar. That night he had come down to use the telephone in Finnegan's office. A coupé had drawn up outside. The coachman had stayed on his seat; some customers recalled that he wore the mask of a bear. Two harlequins got out of the carriage. They were very short men and nobody could help noticing that they were very drunk. Bleating their horns, they burst into Finnegan's office, throwing their arms around Gryphius, who seemed to know them but who did not warm to their company. The three exchanged a few words in Yiddish—he in a low, guttural voice, they in a piping falsetto—and they climbed the stairs up to his room. In a quarter of an hour they came down again, very happy. Gryphius, staggering, seemed as drunk as the others. He walked in the middle, tall and dizzy, between the two masked harlequins. (One of the women in the bar remembered their costumes of red, green, and yellow lozenges.) Twice he stumbled; twice the harlequins held him up. Then the trio climbed into the coupé and, heading for the nearby docks (which enclosed a string of rectangular bodies of water), were soon out of sight. Out front, from the running board, the last harlequin had scrawled an obscene drawing and certain words on one of the market slates hung from a pillar of the arcade.

Treviranus stepped outside for a look. Almost predictably, the phrase read:

*The last letter of the Name has been uttered*

He next examined Gryphius-Ginzberg's tiny room. On the floor was a star-shaped spatter of blood; in the corners, cigarette butts of a Hungarian brand; in the wardrobe, a book in Latin—a 1739 edition of Leusden's *Philologus Hebraeo-Graecus*—with a number of annotations written in by hand. Treviranus gave it an indignant look and sent for Lönnrot. While the Inspector questioned the contradictory witnesses to the possible kidnapping, Lönnrot, not even bothering to take off his hat, began reading. At four o'clock they left. In the twisted Rue de Toulon, as they were stepping

over last night's tangle of streamers and confetti, Treviranus remarked, "And if tonight's events were a put-up job?"

Erik Lönnrot smiled and read to him with perfect gravity an underlined passage from the thirty-third chapter of the *Philologus*: "*'Dies Judaeorum incipit a solis occasu usque ad solis occasum diei sequentis.'* Meaning," he added, "the Jewish day begins at sundown and ends the following sundown."

The other man attempted a bit of irony. "Is that the most valuable clue you've picked up tonight?" he said.

"No. Far more valuable is one of the words Ginzberg used to you on the phone."

The evening papers made a great deal of these recurrent disappearances. *La Croix de l'Épée* contrasted the present acts of violence with the admirable discipline and order observed by the last Congress of Hermits. Ernst Palast, in *The Martyr*, condemned "the unbearable pace of this unauthorized and stinting pogrom, which has required three months for the liquidation of three Jews." The *Jüdische Zeitung* rejected the ominous suggestion of an anti-Semitic plot, "despite the fact that many penetrating minds admit of no other solution to the threefold mystery." The leading gunman of the city's Southside, Dandy Red Scharlach, swore that in his part of town crimes of that sort would never happen, and he accused Inspector Franz Treviranus of criminal negligence.

On the night of March first, Inspector Treviranus received a great sealed envelope. Opening it, he found it contained a letter signed by one "Baruch Spinoza" and, evidently torn out of a Baedeker, a detailed plan of the city. The letter predicted that on the third of March there would not be a fourth crime because the paint and hardware store on the Westside, the Rue de Toulon tavern, and the Hôtel du Nord formed "the perfect sides of an equilateral and mystical triangle." In red ink the map demonstrated that the three sides of the figure were exactly the same length. Treviranus read this Euclidean reasoning

with a certain weariness and sent the letter and map to Erik Lönnrot—the man, beyond dispute, most deserving of such cranky notions.

Lönnrot studied them. The three points were, in fact, equidistant. There was symmetry in time (December third, January third, February third); now there was symmetry in space as well. All at once he felt he was on the verge of solving the riddle. A pair of dividers and a compass completed his sudden intuition. He smiled, pronounced the word Tetragrammaton (of recent acquisition) and called the Inspector on the phone.

"Thanks for the equilateral triangle you sent me last night," he told him. "It has helped me unravel our mystery. Tomorrow, Friday, the murderers will be safely behind bars; we can rest quite easy."

"Then they aren't planning a fourth crime?"

"Precisely because they *are* planning a fourth crime we can rest quite easy."

Lönnrot hung up the receiver. An hour later, he was traveling on a car of the Southern Railways on his way to the deserted villa Triste-le-Roy. To the south of the city of my story flows a dark muddy river, polluted by the waste of tanneries and sewers. On the opposite bank is a factory suburb where, under the patronage of a notorious political boss, many gunmen thrive. Lönnrot smiled to himself, thinking that the best-known of them—Red Scharlach—would have given anything to know about this sudden excursion of his. Azevedo had been a henchman of Scharlach's. Lönnrot considered the remote possibility that the fourth victim might be Scharlach himself. Then he dismissed it. He had practically solved the puzzle; the mere circumstances—reality (names, arrests, faces, legal and criminal proceedings)—barely held his interest now. He wanted to get away, to relax after three months of desk work and of snail-pace investigation. He reflected that the solution of the killings lay in an anonymously sent triangle and in a dusty Greek word. The mystery seemed almost crystal clear. He felt ashamed for having spent close to a hundred days on it.

The train came to a stop at a deserted loading platform. Lönnrot got off. It was one of those forlorn evenings that seem as empty as dawn. The air off the darkening prairies was damp and cold. Lönnrot struck out across the fields. He saw dogs, he saw a flatcar on a siding, he saw the line of the horizon, he saw a pale horse drinking stagnant water out of a ditch. Night was falling when he saw the rectangular mirador of the villa Triste-le-Roy, almost as tall as the surrounding black eucalyptus trees. He thought that only one more dawn and one more dusk (an ancient light in the east and another in the west) were all that separated him from the hour appointed by the seekers of the Name.

A rusted iron fence bounded the villa's irregular perimeter. The main gate was shut. Lönnrot, without much hope of getting in, walked completely around the place. Before the barred gate once again, he stuck a hand through the palings—almost mechanically—and found the bolt. The squeal of rusted iron surprised him. With clumsy obedience, the whole gate swung open.

Lönnrot moved forward among the eucalyptus trees, stepping on the layered generations of fallen leaves. Seen from up close, the house was a clutter of meaningless symmetries and almost insane repetitions: one icy Diana in a gloomy niche matched another Diana in a second niche; one balcony appeared to reflect another; double outer staircases crossed at each landing. A two-faced Hermes cast a monstrous shadow. Lönnrot made his way around the house as he had made his way around the grounds. He went over every detail; below the level of the terrace he noticed a narrow shutter.

He pushed it open. A few marble steps went down into a cellar. Lönnrot, who by now anticipated the architect's whims, guessed that in the opposite wall he would find a similar sets of steps. He did. Climbing them, he lifted his hands and raised a trapdoor.

A stain of light led him to a window. He opened it. A round yellow moon outlined two clogged fountains in the unkempt garden. Lönnrot explored the house. Through serv-

ing pantries and along corridors he came to identical courtyards and several times to the same courtyard. He climbed dusty stairways to circular anterooms, where he was multiplied to infinity in facing mirrors. He grew weary of opening or of peeping through windows that revealed, outside, the same desolate garden seen from various heights and various angles; and indoors he grew weary of the rooms of furniture, each draped in yellowing slipcovers, and the crystal chandeliers wrapped in tarlatan. A bedroom caught his attention—in it, a single flower in a porcelain vase. At a touch, the ancient petals crumbled to dust. On the third floor, the last floor, the house seemed endless and growing. The house is not so large, he thought. This dim light, the sameness, the mirrors, the many years, my unfamiliarity, the loneliness are what make it large.

By a winding staircase he reached the mirador. That evening's moon streamed in through the diamond-shaped panes; they were red, green, and yellow. He was stopped by an awesome, dizzying recollection.

Two short men, brutal and stocky, threw themselves on him and disarmed him: another, very tall, greeted him solemnly and told him, "You are very kind. You've saved us a night and a day."

It was Red Scharlach. The men bound Lönnrot's wrists. After some seconds, Lönnrot at last heard himself saying, "Scharlach, are you after the Secret Name?"

Scharlach remained standing, aloof. He had taken no part in the brief struggle and had barely held out his hand for Lönnrot's revolver. He spoke. Lönnrot heard in his voice the weariness of final triumph, a hatred the size of the universe, a sadness as great as that hatred.

"No," said Scharlach. "I'm after something more ephemeral, more frail. I'm after Erik Lönnrot. Three years ago, in a gambling dive on the Rue de Toulon, you yourself arrested my brother and got him put away. My men managed to get me into a coupé before the shooting was over but I had a cop's bullet in my guts. Nine days and nine nights I went through hell, here in this deserted villa

racked with fever. The hateful two-faced Janus that looks on the sunsets and the dawns filled both my sleep and my wakefulness with its horror. I came to loathe my body, I came to feel that two eyes, two hands, two lungs, are as monstrous as two faces. An Irishman, trying to convert me to the faith of Jesus, kept repeating to me the saying of the *goyim*—All roads lead to Rome. At night, my fever fed on that metaphor. I felt the world was a maze from which escape was impossible since all roads, though they seemed to be leading north or south, were really leading to Rome, which at the same time was the square cell where my brother lay dying and also this villa, Triste-le-Roy. During those nights, I swore by the god who looks with two faces and by all the gods of fever and of mirrors that I would weave a maze around the man who sent my brother to prison. Well, I have woven it and it's tight. Its materials are a dead rabbi, a compass, an eighteenth-century sect, a Greek word, a dagger, and the diamond-shaped patterns on a paint-store wall."

Lönnrot was in a chair now, with the two short men at his side.

"The first term of the series came to me by pure chance," Scharlach went on. "With some associates of mine—among them Daniel Azevedo—I'd planned the theft of the Tetrarch's sapphires. Azevedo betrayed us. He got drunk on the money we advanced him and tried to pull the job a day earlier. But there in the hotel he got mixed up and around two in the morning blundered into Yarmolinsky's room. The rabbi, unable to sleep, had decided to do some writing. In all likelihood, he was preparing notes or a paper on the Name of God and had already typed out the words 'The first letter of the Name has been uttered.' Azevedo warned him not to move. Yarmolinsky reached his hand toward the buzzer that would have wakened all the hotel staff; Azevedo struck him a single blow with his knife. It was probably a reflex action. Fifty years of violence had taught him that the easiest and surest way is to kill. Ten days later, I found out through the *Jüdische*

*Zeitung* that you were looking for the key to Yarmolinsky's death in his writings. I read his *History of the Hasidic Sect*. I learned that the holy fear of uttering God's Name had given rise to the idea that that Name is secret and all-powerful. I learned that some of the Hasidim, in search of that secret Name, had gone as far as to commit human sacrifices. The minute I realized you were guessing that the Hasidim had sacrificed the rabbi, I did my best to justify that guess. Yarmolinsky died the night of December third. For the second 'sacrifice' I chose the night of January third. The rabbi had died on the Northside; for the second 'sacrifice' we wanted a spot on the Westside. Daniel Azevedo was the victim we needed. He deserved death—he was impulsive, a traitor. If he'd been picked up, it would have wiped out our whole plan. One of my men stabbed him; in order to link his corpse with the previous one, I scrawled on the diamonds of the paint-store wall 'The second letter of the Name has been uttered.' "

Scharlach looked his victim straight in the face, then continued. "The third 'crime' was staged on the third of February. It was, as Treviranus guessed, only a plant. Gryphius-Ginzberg-Ginsburg was me. I spent an interminable week (rigged up in a false beard) in that flea-ridden cubicle on the Rue de Toulon until my friends came to kidnap me. From the running board of the carriage, one of them wrote on the pillar, 'The last letter of the Name has been uttered.' That message suggested that the series of crimes was *threefold*. That was how the public understood it. I, however, threw in repeated clues so that you, Erik Lönnrot the reasoner, might puzzle out that the crime was *fourfold*. A murder in the north, others in the east and west, demanded a fourth murder in the south. The Tetragrammaton—the Name of God, JHVH—is made up of *four* letters; the harlequins and the symbol on the paint store also suggest *four* terms. I underlined a certain passage in Leusden's handbook. That passage makes it clear that the Jews reckoned the day from sunset to sunset; that passage makes it understood that the deaths occurred on the *fourth*

of each month. I was the one who sent the triangle to Treviranus, knowing in advance that you would supply the missing point—the point that determines the perfect rhombus, the point that fixes the spot where death is expecting you. I planned the whole thing, Erik Lönnrot, so as to lure you to the loneliness of Triste-le-Roy."

Lönnrot avoided Scharlach's eyes. He looked off at the trees and the sky broken into dark diamonds of red, green, and yellow. He felt a chill and an impersonal, almost anonymous sadness. It was night now; from down in the abandoned garden came the unavailing cry of a bird. Lönnrot, for one last time, reflected on the problem of the patterned, intermittent deaths.

"In your maze there are three lines too many," he said at last. "I know of a Greek maze that is a single straight line. Along this line so many thinkers have lost their way that a mere detective may very well lose his way. Scharlach, when in another incarnation you hunt me down, stage (or commit) a murder at A, then a second murder at B, eight miles from A, then a third murder at C, four miles from A and B, halfway between the two. Lay in wait for me then at D, two miles from A and C, again halfway between them. Kill me at D, the way you are going to kill me here at Triste-le-Roy."

"The next time I kill you," said Scharlach, "I promise you such a maze, which is made up of a single straight line and which is invisible and unending."

He moved back a few steps. Then, taking careful aim, he fired.

# Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth

(1949)

. . . like the spider, which  
builds itself a feeble house.

The Koran, xxix, 40

"This," said Dunraven with a sweeping gesture that did not fail to embrace the misty stars while it took in the bleak moor, the sea, the dunes, and an imposing, tumbledown building that somehow suggested a stable long since fallen into disrepair, "this is the land of my forebears."

Unwin, his companion, drew the pipe out of his mouth and made some faint sounds of approval. It was the first summer evening of 1914; weary of a world that lacked the dignity of danger, the two friends set great value on these far reaches of Cornwall. Dunraven cultivated a dark beard and thought of himself as the author of a substantial epic, which his contemporaries would barely be able to scan and whose subject had not yet been revealed to him; Unwin had published a paper on the theory supposed to have been written by Fermat in the margin of a page of Diophantus. Both men—need it be said?—were young, dreamy, and passionate.

"It's about a quarter of a century ago now," said Dun-



raven, "that Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, chief or king of I don't know what Nilotic tribe, died in the central room of this house at the hands of his cousin Zaid. After all these years, the facts surrounding his death are still unclear."

Unwin, as was expected of him, asked why.

"For several reasons," was the answer. "In the first place, this house is a labyrinth. In the second place, it was watched over by a slave and a lion. In the third place, a hidden treasure vanished. In the fourth place, the murderer was dead when the murder happened. In the fifth place—"

Tired out, Unwin stopped him.

"Don't go on multiplying the mysteries," he said. "They should be kept simple. Bear in mind Poe's purloined letter, bear in mind Zangwill's locked room."

"Or made complex," replied Dunraven. "Bear in mind the universe."

Climbing the steep dunes, they had reached the labyrinth. It seemed to them, up close, a straight and almost endless wall of unplastered brick, barely higher than a man's head. Dunraven said that the building had the shape of a circle, but so wide was this circle that its curve was almost invisible. Unwin recollected Nicholas of Cusa, to whom a straight line was the arc of an infinite circle. They walked on and on, and along about midnight discovered a narrow opening that led into a blind, unsafe passage. Dunraven said that inside the house were many branching ways but that, by turning always to the left, they would reach the very center of the network in little more than an hour. Unwin assented. Their cautious footsteps resounded off the stone-paved floor; the corridor branched into other, narrower corridors. The roof was very low, making the house seem to want to imprison them, and they had to walk one behind the other through the complex dark. Unwin went ahead, forced to slacken the pace because of the rough masonry and the many turns. The unseen wall flowed on by his hand, endlessly. Unwin, slow in the blackness, heard from his friend's lips the tale of the death of Ibn Hakkan.

"Perhaps the oldest of my memories," Dunraven said, "is

the one of Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari in the port of Pentreath. At his heels followed a black man with a lion— unquestionably they were the first black man and the first lion my eyes had ever seen, outside of engravings from the Bible. I was a boy then, but the beast the color of the sun and the man the color of night impressed me less than Ibn Hakkan himself. To me, he seemed very tall; he was a man with sallow skin, half-shut black eyes, an insolent nose, fleshy lips, a saffron-colored beard, a powerful chest, and a way of walking that was self-assured and silent. At home, I said, 'A king has come on a ship.' Later, when the bricklayers were at work here, I broadened his title and dubbed him King of Babel.

"The news that this stranger would settle in Pentreath was received with welcome, but the scale and shape of his house aroused disapproval and bewilderment. It was not right that a house should consist of a single room and of miles and miles of corridors. 'Among foreigners such houses might be common,' people said, 'but hardly here in England.' Our rector, Mr. Allaby, a man with out-of-the-way reading habits, exhumed an Eastern story of a king whom the Divinity had punished for having built a labyrinth, and he told this story from the pulpit. The very next day, Ibn Hakkan paid a visit to the rectory; the circumstances of the brief interview were not known at the time, but no further sermon alluded to the sin of pride, and the Moor was able to go on contracting masons. Years afterward, when Ibn Hakkan was dead, Allaby stated to the authorities the substance of their conversation.

"Ibn Hakkan, refusing a chair, had told him these or similar words: 'No man can place judgment upon what I am doing now. My sins are such that were I to invoke for hundreds upon hundreds of years the Ultimate Name of God, this would be powerless to set aside the least of my torments; my sins are such that were I to kill you, Reverend Allaby, with these very hands, my act would not increase even slightly the torments that Infinite Justice holds in store for me. There is no land on earth where my

name is unknown. I am Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, and in my day I ruled over the tribes of the desert with a rod of iron. For years and years, with the help of my cousin Zaid, I trampled them underfoot until God heard their outcry and suffered them to rebel against me. My armies were broken and put to the sword; I succeeded in escaping with the wealth I had accumulated during my reign of plunder. Zaid led me to the tomb of a holy man, at the foot of a stone hill. I ordered my slave to watch the face of the desert. Zaid and I went inside with our chest of gold coins and slept, utterly worn out. That night, I believed that a tangle of snakes had trapped me. I woke up in horror. By my side, in the dawn, Zaid lay asleep; a spider web against my flesh had made me dream that dream. It pained me that Zaid, who was a coward, should be sleeping so restfully. I reflected that the wealth was not infinite and that Zaid might wish to claim part of it for himself. In my belt was my silver-handled dagger; I slipped it from its sheath and pierced his throat with it. In his agony, he muttered words I could not make out. I looked at him. He was dead, but, fearing that he might rise up, I ordered my slave to obliterate the dead man's face with a heavy rock. Then we wandered under the sun, and one day we spied a sea. Very tall ships plowed a course through it. I thought that a dead man would be unable to make his way over such waters, and I decided to seek other lands. The first night after we sailed, I dreamed that I killed Zaid. Everything was exactly the same, but this time I understood his words. He said: "As you now kill me, I shall one day kill you, wherever you may hide." I have sworn to avert that threat. I shall bury myself in the heart of a labyrinth so that Zaid's ghost will lose its way.'

"After having said this, he went away. Allaby did his best to think that the Moor was mad and that his absurd labyrinth was a symbol and a clear mark of his madness. Then he reflected that this explanation agreed with the extravagant building and with the extravagant story but not with the strong impression left by the man Ibn Hakkan.

Who knew whether such tales might not be common in the sand wastes of Egypt, who knew whether such queer things corresponded (like Pliny's dragons) less to a person than to a culture? On a visit to London, Allaby combed back numbers of the *Times*; he verified the fact of the uprising and of the subsequent downfall of al-Bokhari and of his vizier, whose cowardice was well known.

"Al-Bokhari, as soon as the bricklayers had finished, installed himself in the center of the labyrinth. He was not seen again in the town; at times, Allaby feared that Zaid had caught up with the king and killed him. At night, the wind carried to us the growling of the lion, and the sheep in their pens pressed together with an ancient fear.

"It was customary for ships from Eastern ports, bound for Cardiff or Bristol, to anchor in the little bay. The slave used to go down from the labyrinth (which at that time, I remember, was not its present rose color but was crimson) and exchanged guttural-sounding words with the ships' crews, and he seemed to be looking among the men for the vizier's ghost. It was no secret that these vessels carried cargoes of contraband, and if of alcohol or of forbidden ivories, why not of dead men as well?

"Some three years after the house was finished, the *Rose of Sharon* anchored one October morning just under the bluffs. I was not among those who saw this sailing ship, and perhaps the image of it I hold in my mind is influenced by forgotten prints of Aboukir or of Trafalgar, but I believe it was among that class of ships so minutely detailed that they seem less the work of a shipbuilder than of a carpenter, and less of a carpenter than of a cabinetmaker. It was (if not in reality, at least in my dreams) polished, dark, fast, and silent, and its crew was made up of Arabs and Malaysians.

"It anchored at dawn, and in the late afternoon of that same day Ibn Hakkan burst into the rectory to see Allaby. He was dominated—completely dominated—by a passion of fear, and was scarcely able to make it clear that Zaid had entered the labyrinth and that his slave and his lion had

already been killed. He asked in all seriousness whether the authorities might be able to help him. Before Allaby could say a word, al-Bokhari was gone—as if torn away by the same terror that had brought him for the second and last time to the rectory. Alone in his library, Allaby reflected in amazement that this fear-ridden man had kept down Sudanese tribes by the knife, knew what a battle was, and knew what it was to kill. Allaby found out the next day that the boat had already set sail (bound for the Red Sea port of Suakin, he later learned). Feeling it was his duty to verify the death of the slave, he made his way up to the labyrinth. Al-Bokhari's breathless tale seemed to him utterly fantastic, but at one turn of the corridor he came upon the lion, and the lion was dead, and at another turn there was the slave, who was also dead, and in the central room he found al-Bokhari—with his face obliterated. At the man's feet was a small chest inlaid with mother-of-pearl; the lock had been forced, and not a single coin was left."

Dunraven's final sentences, underlined by rhetorical pauses, were meant to be impressive; Unwin guessed that his friend had gone over them many times before, always with the same confidence—and with the same flatness of effect. He asked, in order to feign interest, "How were the lion and the slave killed?"

The relentless voice went on with a kind of gloomy satisfaction, "Their faces were also bashed in."

A muffled sound of rain was now added to the sound of the men's steps. Unwin realized that they would have to spend the night in the labyrinth, in the central chamber, but that in time this uncomfortable experience could be looked back on as an adventure. He kept silent. Dunraven could not restrain himself, and asked, in the manner of one who wants to squeeze the last drop, "Can this story be explained?"

Unwin answered, as though thinking aloud, "I have no idea whether it can be explained or not. I only know it's a lie."

Dunraven broke out in a torrent of strongly flavored

language and said that all the population of Pentreath could bear witness to the truth of what he had told and that if he had to make up a story, he was a writer after all and could easily have invented a far better one. No less astonished than Dunraven, Unwin apologized. Time in the darkness seemed more drawn out; both men began to fear they had gone astray, and were feeling their tiredness when a faint gleam of light from overhead revealed the lower steps of a narrow staircase. They climbed up and came to a round room that lay in ruin. Two things were left that attested to the fear of the ill-starred king: a slit of a window that looked out onto the moors and the sea, and a trapdoor in the floor that opened above the curve of the stairway. The room, though spacious, had about it something of a prison cell.

Less because of the rain than because of a wish to have a ready anecdote for friends, the two men spent the night in the labyrinth. The mathematician slept soundly; not so the poet, who was hounded by verses that his judgment knew to be worthless:

Faceless the sultry and overpowering lion,  
Faceless the stricken slave, faceless the king.

Unwin felt that the story of al-Bokhari's death had left him indifferent, but he woke up with the conviction of having unraveled it. All that day, he was preoccupied and unsociable, trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together, and two nights later he met Dunraven in a pub back in London and said to him these or similar words: "In Cornwall, I said your story was a lie. The *facts* were true, or could be thought of as true, but told the way you told them they were obviously lies. I will begin with the greatest lie of all—with the unbelievable labyrinth. A fugitive does not hide himself in a maze. He does not build himself a labyrinth on a bluff overlooking the sea, a crimson labyrinth that can be sighted from afar by any ship's crew. He has no need to erect a labyrinth when the whole world already is one.

For anyone who really wants to hide away, London is a better labyrinth than a lookout tower to which all the corridors of a building lead. The simple observation I have just propounded to you came to me the night before last while we were listening to the rain on the roof and were waiting for sleep to fall upon us. Under its influence, I chose to put aside your absurdities and to think about something sensible."

"About the theory of series, say, or about a fourth dimension of space?" asked Dunraven.

"No," said Unwin, serious. "I thought about the labyrinth of Crete. The labyrinth whose center was a man with the head of a bull."

Dunraven, steeped in detective stories, thought that the solution of a mystery is always less impressive than the mystery itself. Mystery has something of the supernatural about it, and even of the divine; its solution, however, is always tainted by sleight of hand. He said, to put off the inevitable, "On coins and in sculpture the Minotaur has a bull's head. Dante imagined it as having the body of a bull and a man's head."

"That version also fits my solution," Unwin agreed. "What matters is that both the dwelling and the dweller be monstrous. The Minotaur amply justifies its maze. The same can hardly be said of a threat uttered in a dream. The Minotaur's image once evoked (unavoidably, of course, in a mystery in which there is a labyrinth), the problem was virtually solved. Nonetheless, I confess I did not fully understand that this ancient image held the key, but in your story I found a detail I could use—the spider web."

"The spider web?" repeated Dunraven, baffled.

"Yes. It wouldn't surprise me at all if the spider web (the Platonic spider web—let's keep this straight) may have suggested to the murderer (for there is a murderer) his crime. You remember that al-Bokhari, in the tomb, dreamed about a tangle of snakes, and upon waking found that a spider web had prompted his dream. Let us go back to that night in which al-Bokhari had that dream. The de-

feated king and the vizier and the slave are escaping over the desert with treasure. They take shelter for the night in a tomb. The vizier, whom we know to be a coward, sleeps; the king, whom we know to be a brave man, does not sleep. In order not to share the treasure, the king knifes the vizier. Several nights later, the vizier's ghost threatens the king in a dream. All this is unconvincing. To my understanding, the events took place in another way. That night, the king, the brave man, slept, and Zaid, the coward, lay awake. To sleep is to forget all things, and this particular forgetfulness is not easy when you know you are being hunted down with drawn swords. Zaid, greedy, bent over the sleeping figure of his king. He thought about killing him (maybe he even played with his dagger), but he did not dare. He woke the napping slave, they buried part of the treasure in the tomb, and they fled to Suakin and to England. Not to hide themselves from al-Bokhari but to lure him and to kill him, they built—like the spider its web—the crimson labyrinth on the high dunes in sight of the sea. The vizier knew that ships would carry to Nubian ports the tale of the red-bearded man, of the slave, and of the lion, and that sooner or later al-Bokhari would come in search of them in their labyrinth. In the last passageway of the maze, the trap lay waiting. Al-Bokhari had always underrated Zaid, and now did not lower himself to take the slightest precaution. At last, the wished-for day came; Ibn Hakkan landed in England, went directly to the door of the maze, made his way into its blind corridors, and perhaps had already set foot on the first steps when his vizier killed him—I don't know whether with a bullet—from the trapdoor in the ceiling. The slave would finish off the lion and another bullet would finish off the slave. Then Zaid crushed the three faces with a rock. He had to do it that way; one dead man with his face bashed in would have suggested a problem of identity, but the beast, the black man, and the king formed a series, and, given the first two terms, the last one would seem natural. It is not to be wondered at that he was driven by fear when he spoke to Allaby; he had just

finished his awful job and was about to flee England and unearth the treasure."

A thoughtful silence, or disbelief, followed Unwin's words. Dunraven asked for another tankard before giving his judgment.

"I admit," he said, "that my Ibn Hakkan could have been Zaid. Such metamorphoses are classic rules of the game, are accepted *conventions* demanded by the reader. What I am unwilling to admit is your conjecture that a part of the treasure remained in the Sudan. Remember that Zaid fled from the king and from the king's enemies both; it is easier to picture him stealing the whole hoard than taking the time to bury a portion of it. At the very end, perhaps no coins were found in the chest because no coins were left. The bricklayers would have eaten up a fortune that, unlike the red gold of the Nibelungs, was not inexhaustible. And so we have Ibn Hakkan crossing the seas in order to recover a treasure already squandered."

"I shouldn't say squandered," Unwin said. "The vizier invested it, putting together on an island of infidels a great circular trap made of brick and destined not only to lure a king but to be his grave. Zaid, if your guess is correct, acted out of hate and fear, and not out of greed. He stole the treasure, and only later found that he was really after something else. He really wanted to see Ibn Hakkan dead. He pretended to be Ibn Hakkan, he killed Ibn Hakkan, and in the end he *became* Ibn Hakkan."

"Yes," agreed Dunraven. "He was a good-for-nothing who, before becoming a nobody in death, wanted one day to look back on having been a king or having been taken for a king."

# The Man on the Threshold

(1952)

Bioy-Casares brought back with him from London a strange dagger with a triangular blade and a hilt in the shape of an H; a friend of ours, Christopher Dewey of the British Council, told us that such weapons were commonly used in India. This statement prompted him to mention that he had held a job in that country between the two wars. ("*Ultra Auroram et Gangem*," I recall his saying in Latin, misquoting a line from Juvenal.) Of the stories he entertained us with that night, I venture to set down the one that follows. My account will be faithful; may Allah deliver me from the temptation of adding any circumstantial details or of weighing down the tale's Oriental character with interpolations from Kipling. It should be remarked that the story has a certain ancient simplicity that it would be a pity to lose—something perhaps straight out of the *Arabian Nights*.

The precise geography [Dewey said] of the events I am going to relate is of little importance. Besides, what would