

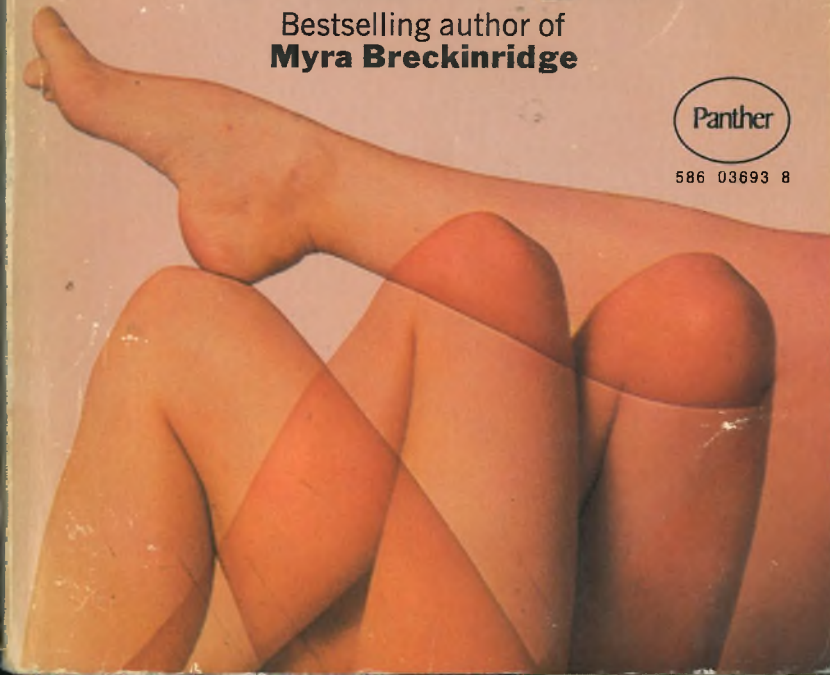
TWO SISTERS

GORE VIDAL

Bestselling author of
Myra Breckinridge



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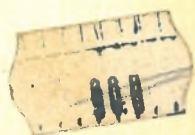
After **Myra Breckinridge***, no-one should need reminding that Gore Vidal is an unsurpassed master of the art of elegant outrage. In **Two Sisters** he has taken as his theme one of the most taboo areas of human sexuality and created a deft, sophisticated novel in which truth and fiction are scandalously blended to devastating effect.

'Witty, civilised, ferocious . . . polished and entertaining'
Sunday Mirror

'Highly entertaining'
Daily Telegraph

'Pure pleasure from beginning to end . . . very funny'
The Times

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‘Witty, civilised and ferocious. . . . It has been said in America that the novel is a satire on the Kennedy myth. Be that as it may, Vidal has written a polished and entertaining book’

Sunday Mirror

Is the Kennedy clan in this latest novel by the world-famous author of *Myra Breckinridge*? Certainly *Two Sisters* contains a lot of dirt on the recent American scene – and inside dirt at that. *The Spectator* reviewer had Mr. Vidal dead to rights when he wrote of him that ‘Vidal could be compared to a fedayeen with a gun – as long as he’s pulling the trigger he’s happy.’

If you’re one of those readers who likes (quoting *The Sunday Express*) his books to be ‘weird, literary, amusing and acid’ *Two Sisters* is very much your sort of novel.

Also by Gore Vidal in Panther Books

Washington, D.C.

Williwaw

Myra Breckinridge

Gore Vidal

Two Sisters

a memoir in the form of a novel

Panther

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Si le monde se plaint de quoy je parle trop de moy, je me plains de quoy il ne pense seulement pas a soy.

Du Repentir, Montaigne

Now

Despite my protests, Marietta revealed her breasts.

'You would never know – well, *you* would, but no one else – that I shall be fifty-two years old this November. Sagittarius, what else? That's why we get on so well. Cancer always does with Sagittarius.'

'Libra.' As I gazed without lust at those familiar not altogether fallen breasts, they suddenly resembled scales, my birth sign made absurdly flesh.

'They still look awfully nice. But I think you'd better cover up.' I indicated the building opposite. The sight of her had frozen two plasterers at their work: the scales had become the minatory eyes of Medusa.

'You were always such a prude.' With a brisk shake, reminiscent of her old friend Isadora Duncan, she returned the relics of our past association to her blouse. Released from Marietta's spell, one workman dropped a bucket and looked to heaven for a sign while the other, eyes shut, gripped his genitals – in Italy a common gesture and not, as foreigners think, a sign of lewdness or vice but a way of touching base in order to ward off the evil eye.

Marietta often has that effect on men. It is no accident that her favourite adjective is 'ensorcelled'. She cannot write a book without it. Unfortunately I cannot read a book that contains it (excepting always the handsome prose of Anaïs Nin). This has made for a degree of coolness between us since Marietta wants to be not only a love goddess (a legend in her own time, as the reviewers say – as, in fact, she herself has so often noted in the five volumes of memoirs she has to date given us), but an artist of the first rank, heiress to Sappho, George Sand, Virginia Woolf, a colossa of literature whose shadow falling across the waste land of twentieth-century art makes sickly pale those contemporaries who must dwell for ever in her shade, particularly Mary McCarthy, Carson McCullers and Marietta's near-contemporary Katherine Anne Porter.

Marietta Donegal is sixty-eight not fifty-two; yet in her way

she is still beautiful, preserved by an insatiable appetite for glory and sex. Alone among the women of our time, Marietta has managed to domesticate Sophocles' cruel and insane master. At eighty she will be making love and writing about it in that long autobiography which begins with our century and will, I am certain, last well into the next for, like it or not, we live in *her* age – was she not the mistress of D. H. Lawrence (two volumes hardly described the three – or was it four? – times she bedded that ensorcelled genius) as well as the beloved inspiration – and brutal seducer – of so many other writers, painters, sculptors and even one President, though whether it was sunrise or sunset at Campobello has never been entirely clear (out of admiration for Eleanor Roosevelt she has yet to give us the entire story). She is unique in all but talent.

'I could hardly believe it when I heard you'd written *Myra Breckinridge*. It was so out of character.'

After a quarter century of publication, I have learned never to discuss my work with other writers. It excites them too much. I shifted Marietta's attention to Nabokov's *Ada* which had just been published. I half-expected her to tell me that she had been his muse, too, but apparently they had not met. I was not surprised to learn that his current vogue distressed her, as it does us all (writers are by nature envious, and easily undone: is there *no* justice?), even though the success of men writers usually does not upset her quite as much as that of women. Shortly after an entire issue of *Horizon* had been devoted to Mary McCarthy's 'The Oasis', the two girls met by accident at Martha's Vineyard. With a terrible cry, Marietta fainted from rage.

'I was so upset by what Nabokov said about you in *Time*.'

'I'm afraid I don't read *Time*.'

This is not true. I am addicted to *Time*'s political 'reporting' in which one can follow from week to week the fictional adventures of actual people. Instead of decently ending, the novel seems to have got a new lease upon our attention in the form of the weekly 'news' magazine.

'Nabokov attacked everyone. Tolstoy. You, Mailer.'

'Ah, that old world charm -'

'Charm! I find it disgusting.'

'But normal. Writers like to attack their betters.'

This was a mistake. Inadvertently, I had left an opening which she was capable of filling; happily, Czarist Russia's gift to our poor letters continued to distract her. 'He attacked *Portnoy's Complaint* -'

'That was unkind. I should have thought the man who celebrated paedophilia would regard masturbation with a tolerant eye.'

'... and said that even *you* were more interesting than Philip Roth.'

'That was perceptive.'

'But you know what he *meant*.'

'I still enjoy his books. Oh, perhaps not as much as he does. That would be impossible but...'

'How easily taken in Americans are! They are mad for foreigners who make fun of them.'

'Don't worry. No one will ever read *Ada*.'

'It is already a bestseller.'

'And has taken its historic place beside *By Love Possessed*, *Ship of Fools*, and *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Books that defy one to read them, in just the way the Sunday *New York Times* does. They are ceremonial artifacts to be displayed but not used.' I was launched upon a favourite theme. Also, in the back of my mind, the perfect analogy to Nabokov had suddenly surfaced. James Branch Cabell. I began to compose a blurb. 'Not since Cabell's *Jurgen* has there been a novel so certain to delight the truly refined reader as Nabokov's *Ada*.'

But Marietta was on her own tack. '*The Heart's Archery* hasn't sold twenty thousand copies since March.'

'The what?'

Marietta's eyes became hard malachite. The voice dropped an octave. 'My last book of memoirs. I sent it to you. You never answered.'

'I never got it.' This was true. 'There is no such thing as a mail service in Rome. Do you know how many sacks of mail there are at San Silvestro?'

The subject did not intrigue her. 'You're in the book, you know.' She sounded threatening. 'That party in Los Angeles. Isherwood's in it, too.'

Marietta was one of the first to realize that in an age of total publicity personality is all that matters. And if one has 'mattered' in the world, by middle age one is sure to have figured in a dozen novels, a hundred memoirs, a thousand newspaper stories. I have already made a number of appearances under my own name in Marietta's memoirs where, inevitably, I say something disagreeable which she gets slightly wrong. Yet, sexually, she is surprisingly coy. Her lovers – if alive – are only embedded, as it were, in her fiction. The three months we lived together in 1947 (I twenty-two, she forty-seven) formed the central motif to one of her most Laurentian novels in which I appear as a faun-faced poet, so overwhelmed by her autumnal beauty and ripe wisdom as to contract an acute case of priapism. At least that is Marietta's version. My recollection is that I was tired a good deal of the time (I was coming down with hepatitis) but enjoyed being with her at the Hôtel de l'Université in Paris for a summer (in 1947 it was always summer) because she had a gift for intimacy. She was – is? – one of those rare women with whom one likes to talk after the act. *Post coitum Marietta* I once called her. I don't think she was pleased.

As we sat on my terrace overlooking all of Rome to the west of the Largo Argentina, a fine if jumbled view of golden buildings, one twisted tower (Borromini's St Ivo), the green Gianicolo and a dozen domes, the nearest Sant'Andrea delle Valle (*Tosca*, Act One), the furthest St Peter's like a grey-ridged skull, Marietta discussed the latest details of her literary career. I shall not record what she said since she is bound to confide it to us in Volume Six of her memoirs.

At first I could not figure out what she wanted. True, she

still expects me to compose a full-scale critique of her work in which, once and for all, her quality is established. For twenty years we have played this game, she cajoling, threatening, weeping, I backing and filling, evading the dread commitment. I had assumed when she rang me this morning to say she was in Rome and needed my advice that, once again, I would be asked, first, to write about her at length or, failing that, to praise in a line or two the . . . what was the title? *The Heart's Archery*. But the expected request was not made. She had something else on her mind.

'Eric Van Damm. You remember him, don't you? From Paris.'

A long shut door swings open to reveal high summer – yes, it was always summer twenty years ago. I am standing in a room at the Hôtel de l'Université as Eric, tall, slender, blond, quite naked, takes apart for the hundredth time his German movie camera. That moment has remained as vivid to me as Henry James's recollection after a half century of a boy cousin being sketched in the nude at Newport before his life was 'cut short, in a cavalry clash, by one of the Confederate bullets of 1863'.

Death, summer, youth – this triad contrives to haunt me every day of my life for it was in summer that my generation left school for war, and several dozen that one knew (but strictly speaking did not love, except perhaps for one) were killed, and so never lived to know what I have known – the Beatles, black power, the Administration of Richard Nixon – all this has taken place in a trivial after-time and has nothing to do with anything that really mattered, with summer and someone hardly remembered, a youth – not Eric – so abruptly translated from vivid, well-loved (if briefly) flesh to a few scraps of bone and cartilage scattered among the volcanic rocks of Iwo Jima. So much was cruelly lost and one still mourns the past, particularly in darkened movie houses, weeping at bad films, or getting drunk alone while watching the Late Show on television as our summer's war is again refought

and one sees sometimes what seems to be a familiar face in the battle scenes – is it Jimmy? But the image is promptly replaced and one will never know whether it was he or only a member of the Screen Actors Guild, now grown old, too.

But in 1948, the war three years behind us, the Korean war not yet upon us – the American empire quiescent, gorged with conquest – we lived as though it would be for ever summer, and did not brood upon our losses. It was enough that Eric Van Damm should say, ‘Well, come on in,’ as I started to leave, embarrassed to find him without clothes. Without self-consciousness or coquetry, he continued to polish lenses as I sat awkwardly on the sagging bed while he asked me what I thought of Marietta.

Now Marietta wants to know what I had thought of him. I answer, truthfully, that although I have a sensuous memory of him I do not, strictly speaking, *think* of him. I don’t tell her that what I best recall are long legs covered with golden hair. To be candid with Marietta means to be fixed for all time in the distorting aspic of her prose.

‘I loved him.’ Marietta can say that sort of thing in a most winning way; it is only when she writes that she loses.

‘Is he still in California?’ The last I had heard of Eric he was making documentaries for television.

Marietta gave me a long look, then she said, very carefully, ‘If you had read *The Heart’s Archery*, which I’m sure you got, you would have known that Eric is dead. . .’

Saw the long legs reduced to bone; saw the blue eyes glaze, and fall back into the skull; saw the skull without skin, lips, smile. Yet it is summer in Rome as I write these lines.

‘How?’

But Marietta is an artist first, a messenger second. ‘I’ve known for some time that you take no interest in my work. Or anything outside yourself. . .’

Some minutes later when she had exhausted herself if not the subject, I learned that Eric had fallen off a roof while filming a riot in Berkeley.

'Such a ridiculous way to die.' Marietta was blunt, having no more fear of death than of life.

'Anyway, I have something of his which I want to show you.' She opened her handbag and removed a scruffy red notebook of the sort French children use in school, and a manuscript.

'He left these by mistake in Paris, for that sister of his . . .'

That sister of his! Erika had been a perfect feminine version of Eric's own perfect youth. Fantasies of the two of them (they were twins, she dark, he fair) have figured, I am certain, in a thousand erotic dreams, for they were rare beings, and quite unknowable. Each made love with the same sort of kind good humour, yet neither seemed entirely present in the act. I looked at the notebook hopefully. Was I about to find out why?

'I was quite upset that summer, as you remember.'

I do not but said I did.

'It was understood that he stay in my room at the Hôtel de l'Université until I got back from Turkey. Well, when I came back he had left with what's her name, the bad actress. . . . ?'

Memory stirred. 'Didn't you use that in your novel *The Archaic Smile*?'

Marietta looked at me like a child given a present. She was, for an instant, a girl again. 'Yes! Yes! Oh, you did read *Smile*! It won the Prix d'Avignon, you know, in French. Yes, I wrote all about Eric and me, and his disappearing, and then running into him years later in Monterey as though nothing had happened. Yes, I wrote it all, just the way it was . . .'

'You never invent, do you?' I could not resist the comment.

'Why should I? The only thing that matters is the life. What *really* happened. You make up everything, don't you?'

'Oh, yes. Everything. Even you.'

But she was not listening.

'Now. I want your professional advice. I read somewhere that you were doing the film of *Myra Breckinridge*.'

'Not exactly. Someone named Zanuck is doing it. He is very talented. But I am doing a screenplay of *Julian*.'

‘Strange the way you’ve always been drawn to history. I hate the past. You’re very like Eric, you know, he liked classical history, too. This . . .’ She held up the script. ‘. . . takes place in the third century B.C.’ I felt a premonitory weariness at the thought of Eric as guide to that lost world.

Then Marietta was all business. She wants to sell the script to a movie producer. With Eric dead, she would be able to keep the money from the sale and buy the Positano villa which, until now, she has only rented. ‘I think I should ask a hundred thousand dollars for it, don’t you?’

I tried to explain to her that it was most unlikely that anyone would want to make a film based on a twenty-year-old screenplay by an unknown writer, but Marietta was confident. ‘That sort of thing is extremely popular now. Look at Fellini and *Satyricon*. The timing couldn’t be better. And with you knowing all these film people . . . well, I’m sure you’ll find somebody who’ll buy it. You are such a friend, really!’

‘What is the notebook?’

Marietta frowned. ‘Very odd. I don’t think you’ll like it. After all, you’re in it. We all are.’

‘A diary?’

‘No. Just . . . well, you’ll see. Eric was not what he seemed.’

I realized at that moment that I did not want to read either notebook or script. Most people – and all women – are eager to read other people’s mail, eavesdrop upon other people’s conversations, to find out just what it is that others say of them. I am the opposite. I have no desire to know the worst or for that matter the best, unlike Marietta who reads everything written about her. From Kyoto to Spokane, book reviewers have been astonished to receive long letters from Marietta, analysing what they have said of her and though no praise has ever been quite sufficient (I compared her once to Katherine Mansfield; she did not speak to me for a year), Marietta is a master of ‘ensorcelling’ those who write book chat for the press, turning to them that legendary Aphrodite face which D. H. Lawrence had on three – no, three and a half – occasions

scratched with his bronze fox beard. The reviewer has not been born who can entirely resist the full panoply of such all-conquering charm; as a result, her pen-pals now range across the earth and her fame increases with each passing year for, truth to tell, Marietta is an astonishingly good writer of the sacred monster sort and the decades in which she was regarded as something of a joke ('Claire Clairemont without the wit,' Cyril Connolly was supposed to have said) made her not only bitter but strong and infinitely cunning in exhibiting both self and work as one until, just as the post-war period became pre-war (*circa* 1965), she was able to enter her kingdom, for she is exactly what the times require: a writer who is neither more nor less than what he writes. Entirely lacking in the creative imagination, Marietta Donegal is triumphant, though not as rich as she would like to be.

'I do need money,' She rose to go. 'Mario is waiting in the Piazza Navona.' I have long since stopped asking her to identify for me the Marios and Guidos, the Benjamins and Dereks who are for ever waiting a few streets away, priests of her cult, and with the passing years no doubt well paid for their ministrations at that high and entirely public altar.

'We're driving down to Positano tomorrow. I'll come by in the morning, to see what you think.'

Dramatically she embraced me on the terrace. Over her shoulder I could see the two plasterers, morbidly eager for another glimpse of that ancient dauntless flesh, but to my relief she disappointed them and allowed me to lead her inside the apartment, still cool with the early morning of a fine summer day.

At the front door, Marietta paused. 'Do you believe in possession?'

'Nine parts of the law?'

'No. Spiritual possession. One person's spirit inhabiting another person's body, mind, personality.'

'Marietta, I do not believe in ghosts, astrology, palmistry, graphology, John Cage, love or God. I do believe in the mo-

ment, in the pleasures of the flesh, of conversation, of art – at least for the few so minded. I believe –’

‘What is art?’ Marietta is a tough in-fighter, and knows all the right questions. Unfortunately she is driven to give wrong answers. She is very effective on television panel programmes.

‘If I told you what art was you would turn into a pillar of salt.’

‘A pity you never wrote with so much feeling as you did in *The City and the Pillar*. Of course it was a very young book but – oh, what a good time we had in New York that winter! At least I did. But then I’ve always been freer than you – and that’s all I really wanted for you, to release your inhibitions, to teach you to *flow*, to put you on the throne, Dauphin to my Joan.’

‘You were Joan all right, but unfortunately I was Gilles de Rais.’ This was half-hearted. As usual, Marietta had managed a series of low blows.

‘You are too intellectual, my dear. Too self-absorbed ever to allow yourself to *flow* –’

‘I’m not a river.’ I was brisk. ‘Who was possessed by whom – or what?’

‘Eric. Now don’t look like that. I’m quite serious. I’ve always believed that the dead continue to exist. Somehow. Somewhere. And I think that sometimes they even inhabit us, speak through us –’

‘Have you been getting messages from Eric?’

‘No. But last fall in Taos I saw Lawrence, in front of the post-office.’

‘How did he look?’

‘Troubled. He was carrying a large cactus in a pot.’

‘Did he speak?’

‘No. He was just there. Briefly. Then he faded. Like a mirage. Like a vision of water in a road on a hot day. Poor Lawrence. How he suffered. Trapped by that dreadful Frieda –’

Marietta was drifting off course. ‘Eric.’ I tugged her back to the subject.

'You'll see when you read what he's written. *If* he wrote it and not someone else.'

'Who else?'

But Marietta enjoys mystery, having none herself.

'Someone dead for more than two thousand years.'

Depression again. 'Not Jesus of Nazareth, a simple carpenter with a lesson for all men?' The golden Eric was capable of dross.

'No. Someone quite different. Anyway, you'll be fascinated. I was. Eric was not the person we thought. Not at all. But the film could be marvellous. Ten per cent for you, if you can place it.'

Marietta was gone. I sit now on the terrace, beneath the lemon tree which, each year, produces so many blossoms but never the expected lemon. Just above the tree, a daytime moon, ash white on blue, and circled at this very minute by three Americans, with a flag.

To read, or not? I dread meeting myself in Eric's pages. In a sense, the only purpose of life is the creation of a self and what matters, finally, is the sum total of all one's attempts. By themselves, the early drafts are simply glum reminders that at any given moment in one's youth unripeness was all; the latest draft, for all its flaws, at least has the charm of familiarity; with all those Xings and inter-linear additions it is still somehow *right*, and though the basic text varies little from youth to age, the means of execution shift and change.

Last summer at Sag Harbor, listening to Dwight Mac-Donald talk on and on, entirely happy in his pursuit of thought, I said, 'Don't you realize, Dwight, you have nothing to say, only to add?' He stopped short; said he found this a most impressive statement (he has the ability to listen while talking – a rare gift, alas, not mine). Yet what I said of him I really meant to say of myself, of us all. For what is there to *say*, finally, except that pain is bad and pleasure good, life all, death nothing? To these obvious texts, one can only add one's life which is so little, particularly if words are one's only means of telling

what was, what is, what ought to be. Marietta commands battalions, divisions, armies (of night and day) of words and yet loses every war. While I am a solitary rifleman behind a tree, waiting to shoot down the pale rider when at last he appears (even as I write this, I hear the earthy drumming of his horse's hooves). But as I wait for him, M.1 rifle at the ready, I know that victory in our private war is already his – structured that way, as the academics say – and all that matters is the accuracy with which one isolates that pale head, holds it in the gun's sight, and fires: so death dies and one's life, too. Perhaps it is only the tree which matters, and the long waiting. In any case, master of armies or lonely sharpshooter, the enemy is plain. Eric used film (not words) and fell while taking pictures from a roof, and all that's left of him for me as I sit now beneath a lemon tree on the terrace of a Roman flat is what I am about to read.

Then

You want to know just what I'm doing and thinking so I'll start where we left off. You took the train to Le Havre at eleven and at three o'clock I went to see that movie producer you think so awful, well, he is but fascinating and hot for you, did you know that? 'I luff your sister,' he has said to me twice. You should become a movie star. The work is easy, the money's good but going to bed with Murray Morris is a high price.

Morris Murray? No. Murray Morris. I'm always getting the name wrong. Yesterday I called him Mr Murray. Then when he said just call me Murray, I called him Mr Morris. When he changed it he should've come up with something a bit more memorable, and less confusing, like Delmore Schwartz or Plantagenet Cohen.

I think Murray's Polish originally though he keeps talking about Vienna and how he was a doctor of philosophy before he went to work at UFA and then Hollywood. Now he's finished with Hollywood 'for ever, baby' and setting up in

Paris to make 'feature-length A-type films of a mature point of view without the cretinous restrictions of the studio system in Hollywood where even my picture *Love at the Finland Station* in spite of *two* Academy Award nominations in 1940, was gelded by R.K.O.' The accent is so thick that at first I thought he was referring to Rita Hayworth's *Gilda*, a three-erection film if there ever was one but he meant 'gelded'.

I don't know why I keep thinking he is flat-ass broke but I do even though the Reception people at the Prince des Galles always look pleased whenever we walk by the desk, which must mean he pays his bills since he's been there in a suite for three months, living on room service.

Today was typical. I arrive at three. I knock on the door. No answer. Knock again. Start to go. The door opens a crack. He puts his nose through the crack. It is the largest nose I have ever seen close up. The eyes are small and bright, like a rhinoceros or a wild boar.

'Why are you so early?' He begins each of our sessions with an attempt at putting me on the defensive. I ignore it, which really irritates him. I don't even say I'm on time, which is true. 'You want me to come back later?'

But Murray pulls me into the room. He is wearing a silk dressing-gown, the several hairs on his pointed head rise at various angles. I think what a good shot that would be: those hairs rising like seaweed from smooth sand (a filter light to suggest underwater); then suddenly go to a long shot, and we see it's not seaweed but hair on a head, Murray Morris's head.

In the bedroom, two girls are having at each other on the bed. What am I supposed to do?

Murray grins. 'Like schoolgirls, from the convent, when the nuns are not looking.'

I get the range. 'You're Father Confessor?'

Murray has no humour but some wit. 'I am the Mother Superior who catches them in the act and paddles them.'

Which is what he proceeded to do, all three working from a master script studied the previous day. So far I would say that

Murray is a meticulous craftsman in just about everything except film-making.

Although my French isn't good enough to get every nuance of schoolgirl slang mixed with religious admonitions, I could see that the girls had been brilliantly rehearsed. By the time Murray arrived at the grand finale, working the hairbrush rapidly from Buttock One to Buttock Four like a xylophonist, I was ready to come, too. But Murray was not about to share anything except the spectacle which ended when he himself turned red in the face and with a gasp achieved climax beneath, thank God, the silk robe.

Then all three mopped up and the girls left and Murray was now ready to talk business over a glass of sparkling Burgundy. Being young and unimportant, I don't rate champagne. 'What I want is to show love on the screen as it has never been shown before.'

'Like that?' I indicated the bedroom and the rumpled sheets, the sodden towels, the lingering smell of those excited 'schoolgirls'.

'Baby, baby.' He shook his head at my coarseness. 'That is not love, that is . . . that is *play*.'

'Well, I'd like to make a playful film.'

But for Murray art is one thing, life another and never shall the two coincide if he can help it. Apparently those years at R.K.O. brainwashed him despite the constant companionship and spiritual guidance of Franz Werfel, author of *The Song of Bernadette*, an unreadable writer he likes to quote.

'I want,' Murray paused, probing one nostril with a stubby finger on which glittered a diamond ring, eyes half shut as he communed with his muse, Mammon's sister. 'I want to make a film of . . . *scope*.'

I nodded to show that I, too, was wedded to scope.

'It must be of . . . classical proportions like Aeschylus.'

Murray has probably read Aeschylus or at least he has taken the trouble to read a good synopsis of the *Oresteia*. He is full of cultural surprises.

'Yet . . .' He paused dramatically, unplugging his nose. 'This film must speak to the people *now*, to the housewife in Pomona, to the garage attendant in Newark, to the . . . the . . .'

'The little people?'

Murray nodded, pleased. Jesus, what a whore I am! And I enjoy it, I really do, but then you always said I had no character, that I take on the personality of the person I'm with which makes it pretty odd when we're together, since we are the same: two sponges – or are you different? I am never certain.

'Eric. I. have. faith. in. you.' That's the way he said it, gravely, carefully, as though testifying in court, something he has probably done quite a bit of. 'Your film I loved. The prize you won at Cannes should've given you the world market but you did not get it, and do you know why?'

'Well, it was just a documentary, about dancers –'

'You did not get a world market because you did not have Murray Morris, Murray Morris who from the first inception of a script can guide your pen. Oh, I'm no writer!' He laughed to show that if he wanted to he could create *The Magic Mountain* with one hand while paddling a convent of nuns with the other.

'I don't pretend to be able to write or direct. *But!* I do know talent, quality. It was I, Murray Morris, who found in this obscure German magazine the short story on which I based *Love at the Finland Station*, with its two Academy Award nominations. It was Murray Morris who mixed the ingredients.' He stirred a great invisible salad for my benefit. I tried to look hungry. 'And that is my function, my dream, to make films of scope with a negative cost of no more than two hundred thousand five while holding below the line costs in Europe to one hundred five, and not a penny more.'

No, I don't know any more about the intricacies of the movie business than you do but he does sound plausible, and though it is madness to trust him, I've got nothing to lose. After all, he is giving me a chance to write an honest-to-God

film and – maybe – direct, though I can't believe that will come true.

'It is because of this respect I have for your film that I want to work with you closely, teaching you everything I know, like a medieval master and his . . . acolyte?'

'Apprentice.'

'Apprentice.' He patted the telephone. 'Do you know who I have a call in to at this very moment?'

I looked at the telephone as though it might speak a holy name. But it was Murray who spoke the name, voice hushed, eyes suddenly watering. 'Garbo!'

We were both so moved that for a long moment we could do nothing but stare at the telephone which he continued to stroke as though it was indeed the actual container of that famous legend. Then Murray leaned forward and whispered in my ear, so that the telephone might not overhear, '*She will return to the cinema for Murray Morris.*'

'What sort of rôle?'

Murray was now on his feet. 'The thing that struck me about you, baby, is not only your fine – if unappreciated by the public – film but your cultural background which so few Americans have, if I may say so. You were a classical scholar at Harvard –'

'Not really. Actually it was at prep school that –'

'You know Greek –'

'Not any more –'

'Don't run yourself down, baby. I want to do a film to be made on location in Greece where I have this wonderful relationship with Kimon Veloudious.'

'Who?'

He looked at me with pity for my ignorant youth. 'The Minister of Culture, and a fine poet. We were at the university together in Prague.' This was new. Usually he spoke only of the University of Vienna. Obviously Murray was a real wandering scholar, an UFA Goliard.

'They want me to make a major film in Athens, using the

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