

LondonBone

A Novelette

By Michael Moorcock

For Ronnie Scott

ONE

My name is Raymond Gold and I'm a well-known dealer. I was born too many years ago in Upper Street, Islington. Everybody reckons me in the London markets and I have a good reputation in Manchester and the provinces. I have bought and sold, been the middleman, an agent, an art representative, a professional mentor, a tour guide, a spiritual bridge-builder. These days I call myself a cultural speculator.

But, you won't like it, the more familiar word for my profession, as I practised it until recently, is scalper. This kind of language is just another way of isolating the small businessman and making what he does seem sleazy while the stockbroker dealing in millions is supposed to be legitimate. But I don't need to convince anyone today that there's no sodding justice.

'Scalping' is risky. What you do is invest in tickets on spec and hope to make a timely sale when the market for them hits zenith. Any kind of ticket, really, but mostly shows. I've never seen anything offensive about getting the maximum possible profit out of an American matron with more money than sense who's anxious to report home with the right items ticked off the beento list. We've all seen them rushing about in their overpriced limos and mini-buses, pretending to be individuals: Thursday:

Changing-of-the-Guard, Harrods, Planet Hollywood, Royal Academy,

Tea-At-the-Ritz, Cats. It's a sort of tribal dance they all feel compelled to perform. If they don't perform it, they feel inadequate. Saturday:

Tower of London, Bucket of Blood, Jack-the-Ripper talk, Sherlock Holmes

Pub, Sherlock Holmes tour, Madame Tussaud's, Covent Garden Cream Tea,

Dogs. These are people so traumatized by contact with strangers that their

only security lies in these rituals, these well-blazed trails and familiar chants. It's my job to smooth their paths, to make them exclaim how pretty and wonderful and elegant and magical it all is. The street people aren't a problem. They're just so many charming Dick Van Dykes.

Americans need bullshit the way koala bears need eucalyptus leaves. They've become totally addicted to it. They get so much of it back home that they can't survive without it. It's your duty to help them get their regular fixes while they travel. And when they make it back after three weeks on alien shores, their friends, of course, are always glad of some foreign bullshit for a change.

Even if you sell a show ticket to a real enthusiast, who has already been forty nine times and is so familiar to the cast they see him in the street and think he's a relative, who are you hurting? AndrosLoud Website, Lady Hatchet's loyal laureate, who achieved rank and wealth by celebrating the lighter side of the moral vacuum? He would surely applaud my enterprise in the buccaneering spirit of the free market. Venture capitalism at its bravest. Well, he'd applaud me if he had time these days from his railings against fate, his horrible understanding of the true nature of his coming obscurity. But that's partly what my story's about.

I have to say in my own favour that I'm not merely a speculator or, if you like, exploiter. I'm also a patron. For many years, not just recently, a niagara of dosh has flowed out of my pocket and into the real arts faster than a cat up a Frenchman. Whole orchestras and famous soloists have been brought to the Wigmore Hall on the money they get from me. But I couldn't have afforded this if it wasn't for the definitely iffy Miss Saigon (a

triumph of well-oiled machinery over dodgy morality) or the unbelievably decrepit Good Rockin' Tonite (in which the living dead jive in the aisles), nor, of course, that first great theatrical triumph of the new millennium, Schindler: The Musical. Make 'em weep, Uncle Walt!

So who is helping most to support the arts? You, me, the lottery?

I had another reputation, of course, which some saw as a second profession. I was one of the last great London characters. I was always on late-night telly lit from below and Iain Sinclair couldn't write a paragraph without dropping my name at least once. I'm a quintessential Londoner, I am. I'm a Cockney gentleman.

I read Israel Zangwill and Gerald Kersh and Alexander Barron. I can tell you the best books of Pett Ridge and Arthur Morrison. I know Pratface Charlie, Driff and Martin Stone, Bernie Michaud and the even more legendary Gerry and Pat Goldstein. They're all historians, archeologists, revenants. There isn't another culture-dealer in London, oldster or child, who doesn't at some time come to me for an opinion. Even now, when I'm as popular as a pig at a Putney wedding and people hold their noses and dive into traffic rather than have to say hello to me, they still need me for that.

I've known all the famous Londoners or known someone else who did. I can tell stories of long-dead gangsters who made the Krays seem like Amnesty International. Bare-knuckle boxing. Fighting the fascists in the East End. Gun-battles with the police all over Stepney in the 1900s. The terrifying girl gangsters of Whitechapel. Barricading the Old Bill in his own barracks down in Notting Dale.

I can tell you where all the music halls were and what was sung in them.

And why. I can tell Marie Lloyd stories and Max Miller stories that are fresh and sharp and bawdy as the day they happened, because their wit and experience came out of the market streets of London. The same streets. The same markets. The same family names. London's markets. Markets are London.

I'm a Londoner through and through. I know Mr Gog personally. I know Ma Gog even more personally. During the day I can walk anywhere from Bow to Bayswater faster than any taxi. I love the markets. Brick Lane. Church Street. Portobello. You won't find me on a bike with my bum in the air on a winter's afternoon. I walk or drive. Nothing in between. I wear a camel-hair in winter and a Barraclough's in summer. You know what would happen to a coat like that on a bike.

I love the theatre. I like modern dance, very good movies and ambitious international contemporary music. I like poetry, prose, painting and the decorative arts. I like the lot, the very best that London's got, the whole bloody casserole. I gobble it all up and bang on my bowl for more.

Let timid greenbelters creep in at weekends and sink themselves in the West End's familiar deodorised shit if they want to. That's not my city. That's a tourist set. It's what I live off. What all of us show-people live off. It's the old, familiar circus. The big rotate.

We're selling what everybody recognises. What makes them feel safe and certain and sure of every single moment in the city. Nothing to worry about in jolly old London. We sell charm and colour by the yard. Whole word factories turn out new rhyming slang and saucy street characters are trained on council grants. Don't frighten the horses. Licensed pearlies

pause for a photo-opportunity in the dockside Secure Zones. Without all that cheap scenery, without our myths and magical skills, without our whorish good cheer and instincts for trade -- any kind of trade -- we probably wouldn't have a living city.

As it is, the real city I live in has per square inch more creative energy at work at any given moment than anywhere else on the planet. But you'd never know it from a stroll up the Strand. It's almost all in those lively little sidestreets the English-speaking tourists can't help feeling a bit nervous about and which the French adore.

If you use music for comfortable escape you'd probably find more satisfying and cheaper relief in a massage parlour than at the umpteenth revival of *The Sound of Music*. I'd tell that to any hesitant punter who's not too sure. Check out the phone boxes for the ladies, I'd say, or you can go to the half-price ticket-booth in Leicester Square and pick up a ticket that'll deliver real value -- Ibsen or Shakespeare, Shaw or Greenbank. Certainly you can fork out three hundred sheets for a fifty sheet ticket that in a justly-ordered world wouldn't be worth two pee and have your ears salved and your cradle rocked for two hours. Don't worry, I'd tell them, I make no judgements. Some hard-working whore profits, whatever you decide. So who's the cynic?

I went on one of those tours when my friends Dave and Di from Bury came up for the Festival of London in 2001 and it's amazing the crap they tell people. They put sex, violence and money into every story. They know fuck-all. They soup everything up. It's Sun-reader history. Even the Beefeaters at the Tower. Poppin'sland. All that old English duff.

It makes you glad to get back to Soho.

Not so long ago you would usually find me in the Princess Louise, Berwick Street, at lunch time, a few doors down from the Chinese chippy and just across from Mrs White's trim stall in Berwick Market. It's only a narrow door and is fairly easy to miss. It has one bottle-glass window onto the street. This is a public house which has not altered since the 1940s when it was very popular with Dylan Thomas, Mervyn Peake, Ruthven Todd, Henry Treece and a miscellaneous bunch of other Welsh adventurers who threatened for a while to take over English poetry from the Irish.

It's a shit pub, so dark and smoky you can hardly find your glass in front of your face, but the look of it keeps the tourists out. It's used by all the culture pros -- from arty types with backpacks, who do specialised walking tours, to famous gallery owners and top museum management -- and by the heavy metal bikers. We all get on a treat. We are mutually dependent in our continuing resistance to invasion or change, to the preservation of the best and most vital aspects of our culture. We leave them alone because they protect us from the tourists, who might recognise us and make us put on our masks in a hurry. They leave us alone because the police won't want to bother a bunch of well-connected middle-class wankers like us. It is a wonderful example of mutuality. In the back rooms, thanks to some freaky acoustics, you can talk easily above the music and hardly know it's there.

Over the years there have been some famous friendships and unions struck between the two groups. My own lady wife was known as Karla the She Goat in an earlier incarnation and had the most exquisite and elaborate tattoos I ever saw. She was a wonderful wife and would have made a perfect mother.

She died on the A1, on the other side of Watford Gap. She had just found out she was pregnant and was making her last sentimental run. It did me in for marriage after that. And urban romance.

I first heard about London Bone in the Princess Lou when Claire Rood, that elegant old dike from the Barbican, who'd tipped me off about my new tailor, pulled my ear to her mouth and asked me in words of solid gin and garlic to look out for some for her, darling. None of the usual faces seemed to know about it. A couple of top level museum people knew a bit, but it was soon obvious they were hoping I'd fill them in on the details.

I showed them a confident length of cuff. I told them to keep in touch.

I did my Friday walk, starting in the horrible pre-dawn chill of the Portobello Road where some youth tried to sell me a bit of scrimshawed reconstitute as 'the real old Bone'. I warmed myself in the showrooms of elegant Kensington and Chelsea dealers telling outrageous stories of deals, profits and crashes until they grew uncomfortable and wanted to talk about me and I got the message and left.

I wound up that evening in the urinal of The Dragoons in Meard Alley, swapping long-time-no-sees with my boyhood friend Bernie Michaud who begins immediately by telling me he's got a bit of business I might be interested in. And since it's Bernie Michaud telling me about it I listen.

Bernie never deliberately spread a rumour in his life but he's always known how to make the best of one. This is kosher, he thinks. It has a bit of a glow. It smells like a winner. A long-distance runner. He is telling me out of friendship, but I'm not really interested. I'm trying to find out about London Bone.

"I'm not talking drugs, Ray, you know that. And it's not bent." Bernie's

little pale face is serious. He takes a thoughtful sip of his whisky. "It is, admittedly, a commodity."

I wasn't interested. I hadn't dealt in goods for years. "Services only, Bernie," I said. "Remember. It's my rule. Who wants to get stuck paying rent on a warehouse full of yesterday's faves? I'm still trying to move those Glenda Sings Michael Jackson sides Pratchett talked me into."

"What about investment?" he says. "This is the real business, Ray, believe me."

So I heard him out. It wouldn't be the first time Bernie had brought me back a nice profit on some deal I'd helped him bankroll and I was all right at the time. I'd just made the better part of a month's turnover on a package of theatreland's most profitable stinkers brokered for a party of filthy-rich New Muscovites who thought Chekhov was something you did with your lottery numbers.

As they absorbed the quintessence of Euro-ersatz, guaranteed to offer, as its high emotional moment, a long, relentless bowel movement, I would be converting their hard roubles back into Beluga.

It's a turning world, the world of the international free market and everything's wonderful and cute and pretty and magical so long as you keep your place on the carousel. It's not good if it stops. And it's worse if you get thrown off altogether. Pray to Mammon that you never have to seek the help of an organization that calls you a 'client'. That puts you outside the fairground forever. No more rides. No more fun. No more life. Bernie only did quality art, so I knew I could trust that side of his judgement, but what was it? A new batch of Raphaels turned up in a

Willesden attic? Andy Warhol's lost landscapes found at the Pheasantry?

"There's American collectors frenzied for this stuff," murmurs Bernie through a haze of Sons of the Wind, Motorchair and Montecristo fumes. "And if it's decorated they go through the roof. All the big Swiss guys are looking for it. Freddy K in Cairo has a Saudi buyer who tops any price. Rose Sarkissian in Agadir represents three French collectors. It's never catalogued. It's all word of mouth. And it's already turning over millions. There's one inferior piece in New York and none at all in Paris. The pieces in Zurich are probably all fakes."

This made me feel that I was losing touch. I still didn't know what he was getting at.

"Listen," I say, "before we go any further, let's talk about this London Bone."

"You're a fly one, Ray," he says. "How did you suss it?"

"Tell me what you know," I say. "And then I'll fill you in."

We went out of the pub, bought some fish-and-chips at the Chinese and then walked up Berwick Street and round to his little club in D'Arblay Street where we sat down in his office and closed the door. The place stank of cat-pee. He doted on his Persians. They were all out in the club at the moment, being petted by the patrons.

"First," he says, "I don't have to tell you Ray that this is strictly double-schtum and I will kill you if a syllable gets out."

"Naturally," I said.

"Have you ever seen any of this Bone?" he asked. He went to his cupboard and found some vinegar and salt. "Or better still handled it?"

"No," I said. "Not unless it's fake scrimshaw."

"This stuff's got a depth to it you've never dreamed about. A lustre. You can tell it's the real thing as soon as you see it. Not just the shapes or the decoration, but the quality of it. It's like it's got a soul. You could come close, but you could never fake it. Like amber, for instance. That's why the big collectors are after it. It's authentic, it's newly-discovered and it's rare."

"What bone is it?"

"Mastodon. Some people still call it mammoth ivory, but I haven't seen any actual ivory. It could be dinosaur. I don't know. Anyway, this bone is better than ivory. Its in weird shapes, probably fragments off some really big animal."

"And where's it coming from?"

"The heavy clay of good old London," says Bernie. "A fortune at our feet, Ray. And my people know where to dig."

TWO

I had to be straight with Bernie. Until I saw a piece of the stuff in my own hand and got an idea about it for myself, I couldn't do anything. The only time in my life I'd gone for a gold brick I'd bought it out of respect for the genius running the scam. He deserved what I gave him. Which was a bit less than he was hoping for. Rather than be conned, I would rather throw the money away. I'm like that with everything.

I had my instincts, I told Bernie. I had to go with them. He understood completely and we parted on good terms.

If the famous Lloyd Webber meltdown of '03 had happened a few months

earlier or later I would never have thought again about going into the Bone business, but I was done in by one of those sudden changes of public taste which made the George M. Cohan crash of '31 seem like a run of The Mousetrap.

Sentimental fascism went out the window. Liberal-humanist contemporary relevance, artistic aspiration, intellectual and moral substance and all that stuff was somehow in demand. It was better than the sixties. It was one of those splendid moments when the public pulls itself together and tries to grow up. Jones's Rhyme of the Flying Bomb song cycle made a glorious come-back. American Angels returned with even more punch. And Sondheim made an incredible come-back.

He became a quality brand-name. If it wasn't by Sondheim or based on a tune Sondheim used to hum in the shower, the punters didn't want to know. Overnight, the public's product loyalty had changed. And I must admit it had changed for the better. But my investments were in Cats, and Dogs (Lord Webber's last desperate attempt to squeeze from Thurber what he sucked from Eliot), Duce! and Starlight Excess, all of which were now taking a walk down Sunset Boulevard. I couldn't even get a regular price ticket for myself at Sunday in the Park, Assassins or Follies. Into The Woods was solid for eighteen months ahead. I saw Passion from the wings and Sweeney Todd from the gods. Five Guys Named Mo crumbled to dust. Phantom closed. Its author claimed sabotage.

"Quality will out, Ray," says Bernie next time I see him at the Lou.

"You've got to grant the public that. You just have to give it time."

"Fuck the public," I said, with some feeling. "They're just nostalgic for quality at the moment. Next year it'll be something else. Meanwhile I'm

bloody ruined. You couldn't drum a couple of oncers on my entire stock.

Even my ENO side-bets have died. Covent Garden's a disaster. The weather in Milan didn't help. That's where Cecilia Bartoli caught her cold. I was lucky to be offered half-price for the Rossinis without her. And I know what I'd do if I could get a varda at bloody Simon Rattle."

"So you won't be able to come in on the Bone deal?" said Bernie returning to his own main point of interest.

"I said I was ruined," I told him, "not wiped out."

"Well, I got something to show you now, anyway," says Bernie.

We went back to his place.

He put it in my hand as if it were a nugget of plutonium, a knuckle of dark, golden Bone, split off from a larger piece, covered with tiny pictures.

"The engravings are always on that kind of Bone," he said. "There are other kinds that don't have drawings, maybe from a later date. It's the work of the first Londoners, I suppose, when it was still a swamp. About the time your Phoenician ancestors started getting into the upriver woad-trade. I don't know the significance, of course."

The Bone itself was hard to analyse because of the mixture of chemicals which has created it and some of it had fused, suggesting prehistoric upheavals of some kind. The drawings were extremely primitive. Any bored person with a sharp object and minimum talent could have done them at any time in history. The larger, weirder looking Bones, had no engravings.

Stick people pursued other stick people endlessly across the fragment. The

work was unremarkable. The beauty really was in the tawny ivory colour of the Bone alone. It glowed with a wealth of shades and drew you hypnotically into its depths. I imagined the huge animal of which this fragment had once been an active part. I saw the bellowing trunk, the vast ears, the glinting tusks succumbing suddenly to whatever had engulfed her. I saw her body swaying, her tail lashing as she trumpeted her defiance of her inevitable death. And now men sought her remains as treasure. It was a very romantic image and of course it would become my most sincere sales pitch.

"That's six million dollars you're holding there," said Bernie. "Minimum."

Bernie had caught me at the right time and I had to admit I was convinced. Back in his office he sketched out the agreement. We would go in on a fifty-fifty basis, funding the guys who would do the actual digging, who knew where the Bone-fields were and who would tell us as soon as we showed serious interest. We would finance all the work, pay them an upfront earnest and then load by load in agreed increments. Bernie and I would split the net profit fifty fifty. There were all kinds of clauses and provisions covering the various problems we foresaw and then we had a deal.

The archeologists came round to my little place in Dolphin Square. They were a scruffy bunch of students from the University of Norbury who had discovered the Bone deposits on a run of the mill field trip in a demolished Southwark housing estate and knew only that there might be a market for them. Recent cuts to their grants had made them desperate. Some lefty had come up with a law out of the Magna Carta or somewhere saying

public land couldn't be sold to private developers and so there was a court case disputing the council's right to sell the estate to Livingstone International which also put a stop to the planned rebuilding so we had indefinite time to work.

The stodies were grateful for our expertise, as well as our cash. I was happy enough with the situation. It was one I felt we could easily control. Middle-class burbnerds get greedy the same as anyone else, but they respond well to reason. I told them for a start off that all the Bone had to come in to us. If any of it leaked onto the market by other means, we'd risk losing our prices and that would mean the scheme was over. Terminated, I said significantly. Since we had reputations as well as investments to protect there would also be recriminations. That's all I had to say. Since those V serials kids think we're Krays and Mad Frankie Frazers just because we like to look smart and talk properly.

We were fairly sure we weren't doing anything obviously criminal. The stuff wasn't treasure trove. It had to be cleared before proper foundations could be poured. Quite evidently LI didn't think it was worth paying security staff to shuft the site. We didn't know if digging shafts and tunnels was even trespass, but we knew we had a few weeks before someone started asking about us and by then we hoped to have the whole bloody mastodon out of the deep clay and nicely earning for us. The selling would take the real skill and that was my job. It was going to have to be played sharper than South African diamonds.

After that neither Bernie nor I had anything to do with the dig. We rented a guarded lockup in Clapham and paid the kids every time they brought in a

substantial load of Bone. It was incredible stuff. Bernie thought that chemical action, some of it relatively recent, had caused the phenomenon. "Like chalk, you know. You hardly find it anywhere. Just a few places in England, France, China and Texas." The kids reported that there was more than one kind of animal down there, but that all the Bone had the same rich appearance. They had constructed a new tunnel, with a hidden entrance, so that even if the building site was blocked to them, they could still get at the Bone. It seemed to be a huge field, but most of the Bone was at roughly the same depth. Much of it had fused and had to be chipped out. They had found no end to it so far and they had tunneled through more than half an acre of the dense, dark clay.

Meanwhile I was in Amsterdam and Rio, Paris and Vienna and New York and Sydney. I was in Tokyo and Seoul and Hong Kong. I was in Riyadh, Cairo and Baghdad. I was in Kampala and New Benin, everywhere there were major punters. I racked up so many free airmiles in a couple of months that they were automatically jumping me to first class. But I achieved what I wanted. Nobody bought London Bone without checking with me. I was the acknowledged expert. The prime source, the best in the business. If you want Bone, said the art world, you want Gold.

The Serious Fraud Squad became interested in Bone for a while, but they had been assuming we were faking it and gave up when it was obviously not rubbish.

Neither Bernie nor I expected it to last any longer than it did. By the time our first phase of selling was over we were turning over so much dough it was silly and the kids were getting tired and were worrying about exploring some of their wildest dreams. There was almost nothing left,

they said. So we closed down the operation, moved our warehouses a couple of times and then let the Bone sit there to make us some money while everyone wondered why it had dried up.

And at that moment, inevitably, and late as ever, the newspapers caught on to the story. There was a brief late-night TV piece. A few supplements talked about it in their arts pages. This led to some news stories and eventually it went to the tabloids and became anything you liked from the remains of Martians to a new kind of nuclear waste. Anyone who saw the real stuff was convinced but everyone had a theory about it. The real exclusive market was finished. We kept schtum. We were gearing up for the second phase. We got as far away from our stash as possible.

Of course a few faces tracked me down, but I denied any knowledge of the Bone. I was a middle-man, I said. I just had good contacts. Half-a-dozen people claimed to know where the Bone came from. Of course they talked to the papers. I sat back in satisfied security, watching the mud swirl over our tracks. Another couple of months and we'd be even safer than the house I'd bought in Hampstead overlooking the heath. It had a rather forlorn garden the size of Kilburn which needed a lot of nurturing. That suited me. I was ready to retire to the country and a big indoor swimming pool. By the time a close version of the true story came out, from one of the stoddies, who'd lost all his share in a lottery syndicate, it was just one of many. It sounded too dull. I told newspaper reporters that while I would love to have been involved in such a lucrative scheme, my money came from theatre tickets. Meanwhile, Bernie and I thought of our warehouse and said nothing.

Now the stuff was getting into the culture. It was chic. Puncher used it in their ads. It was called Mammoth Bone by the media. There was a common story about how a herd had wandered into the swampy river and drowned in the mud. Lots of pictures dusted off from the Natural History Museum. Experts explained the colour, the depths, the markings, the beauty. Models sported a Bone motif.

Our second phase was to put a fair number of inferior fragments on the market and see how the public responded. That would help us find our popular price -- the most a customer would pay. We were looking for a few good millionaires.

Frankly, as I told my partner, I was more than ready to get rid of the lot. But Bernie counselled me to patience. We had a plan and it made sense to stick to it.

The trade continued to run well for a while. As the sole source of the stuff, we could pretty much control everything. Then one Sunday lunchtime I met Bernie at The Six Jolly Dragoons in Meard Alley, Soho. He had something to show me, he said. He didn't even glance around. He put it on the bar in plain daylight. A small piece of Bone with the remains of decorations still on it.

"What about it?" I said.

"It's not ours," he said.

My first thought was that the stodies had opened up the field again. That they had lied to us when they said it had run out.

"No," said Bernie, "it's not even the same colour. It's the same stuff -- but different shades. Gerry Goldstein lent it to me."

"Where did he get it?"

"He was offered it," he said.

We didn't bother to speculate where it had come from. But we did have rather a lot of our Bone to shift quickly. Against my will, I made another world tour and sold mostly to other dealers this time. It was a standard second-wave operation but run rather faster than was wise. We definitely missed the crest.

However, before deliveries were in and cheques were cashed, Jack Merrywidow, the fighting MP for Brookgate and E. Holborn, gets up in the House of Commons on telly one afternoon and asks if Prime Minister Bland or any of his dope-dazed cabinet understand that human remains, taken from the hallowed burial grounds of London, are being sold by the piece in the international market place? Mr Bland makes a plummy joke enjoyed at Mr Merrywidow's expense and sits down. But Jack won't give up. They're suddenly on telly. It's The Struggle of Parliament time. Jack's had the Bone examined by experts. It's human. Undoubtedly human. The strange shapes are caused by limbs melting together in soil heavy with lime. Chemical reactions, he says. We have -- he raises his eyes to the camera -- been mining mass graves.

A shock to all those who still long for the years of common decency. Someone, says Jack, is selling more than our heritage. Hasn't free market capitalism got a little bit out of touch when we start selling the arms, legs and skulls of our forebears? The torsos and shoulder-blades of our honourable dead? What did we used to call people who did that? When was the government going to stop this trade in corpses? It's denied.

It's proved.

It looks like trade is about to slump.

I think of framing the cheques as a reminder of the vagaries of fate and give up any idea of popping the question to my old muse Little Trudi, who is back on the market, having been dumped by her corporate suit in a fit, he's told her, of self-disgust after seeing The Tolstoy Investment with Eddie Izzard. Bernie, I tell my partner, the Bone business is down the drain. We might as well bin the stuff we've stockpiled.

Then two days later the TV news reports a vast public interest in London Bone. Some lordly old queen with four names comes on the evening news to say how by owning a piece of Bone, you own London's true history. You become a curator of some ancient ancestor. He's clearly got a vested interest in the stuff. It's the hottest tourist item since Jack the Ripper razors and OJ gloves. More people want to buy it than ever.

The only trouble is, I don't deal in dead people. It is, in fact, where I have always drawn the line. Even Pratface Charlie wouldn't sell his great, great grandmother's elbow to some overweight Jap in a deerstalker and a kilt. I'm faced with a genuine moral dilemma.

I make a decision. I make a promise to myself. I can't got back on that. I go down to the Italian chippy in Fortess Road, stoke up on nourishing ritual grease (cod, roe, chips and mushy peas, bread and butter and tea, syrup pudding), then heave my out of shape, but mentally prepared, body up onto Parliament Hill to roll myself a big wacky-baccy fag and let my subconscious think the problem through.

When I emerge from my reverie, I have looked out over the whole misty London panorama and considered the city's complex history. I have thought

about the number of dead buried there since, say, the time of Bodicea, and what they mean to the soil we build on, the food we still grow here and the air we breath. We are recycling our ancestors all the time, one way or another. We are sucking them in and shitting them out. We're eating them. We're drinking them. We're coughing them up. The dead don't rest. Bits of them are permanently at work. So what am I doing wrong?

This thought is comforting until my moral sense, sharpening itself up after a long rest, kicks in with -- but what's different here is you're flogging the stuff to people who take it home with them. Back to Wisconsin and California and Peking. You take it out of circulation. You're dissipating the deep fabric of the city. You're unravelling something. Like, the real infrastructure, the spiritual and physical bones of an ancient city...

On Kite Hill I suddenly realise that those bones are in some way the deep lifestuff of London.

It grows dark over the towers and roofs of the metropolis. I sit on my bench and roll myself up a further joint. I watch the silver rising from the river, the deep golden glow of the distant lights, the plush of the foliage, and as I watch it seems to shred before my eyes, like a rotten curtain. Even the traffic noise grows fainter. Is the city sick? Is she expiring? Somehow it seems there's a little less breath in the old girl. I blame myself. And Bernie. And those kids.

There and then, on the spot, I renounce all further interest in the Bone trade. If nobody else will take the relics back, then I will.

There's no resolve purer than the determination you draw from a really

good reefer.

THREE

So now there isn't a tourist in any London market or antique arcade who isn't searching out Bone. They know it isn't cheap. They know they have to pay. And pay they do. Through the nose. And half of what they buy is crap or fakes. This is a question of status, not authenticity. As long as we say it's good, they can say it's good. We give it a provenance, a story, something to colour the tale to the folks back home. We're honest dealers. We sell only the authentic stuff. Still they get conned. But still they look. Still they buy.

Jealous Mancunians and Brummies long for a history old enough to provide them with Bone. A few of the early settlements, like Chester and York, start turning up something like it, but it's not the same. Jim Morrison's remains disappear from Pere La Chaise. They might be someone else's bones, anyway. Rumour is they were KFC bones. The revolutionary death-pits fail to deliver the goods. The French are furious. They accuse the British of gross materialism and poor taste. Oscar Wilde disappears. George Eliot. Winston Churchill. You name them. For a few months there is a grotesque trade in the remains of the famous. But the fashion has no intrinsic substance and fizzles out. Anyone could have seen it wouldn't run. Bone has the image, because Bone really is beautiful.

Too many people are yearning for that Bone. The real stuff. It genuinely hurts me to disappoint them. Circumstances alter cases. Against my better judgement I continue in the business. I bend my principles, just for the duration. We have as much turnover as we had selling to the Swiss gnomes.

It's the latest item on the beento list. 'You have to bring me back some London Bone, Ethel, or I'll never forgive you!' It starts to appear in the American luxury catalogs.

But by now there are ratsniffers everywhere -- from Trade and Industry, from the National Trust, from the Heritage Corp, from half-a-dozen South London councils, from the Special Branch, from the CID, the Inland Revenue and both the Funny and the Serious Fraud Squads.

Any busybody who ever wanted to put his head under someone else's bed is having a wonderful time. Having failed dramatically with the STOP THIS DISGUSTING TRADE approach, the tabloids switch to offering bits of Bone as prizes in circulation boosters. I sell a newspaper consortium a Tesco's plastic bagfull for two-and-a-half mill via a go-between. Bernie and I are getting almost frighteningly rich. I open some bank accounts off-shore and I became an important anonymous shareholder in the Queen Elizabeth Hall when it's privatized.

It doesn't take long for the experts to come up with an analysis. Most of the Bone has been down there since the seventeenth century and earlier.

They are the sites of the old plague pits where legend had it still living corpses were thrown in with the dead. For a while it must have seemed like Auschwitz-on-Thames. The chemical action of lime, partial burning, London clay and decaying flesh, together with the broadening spread of the London water-table, thanks to various engineering works over the last century, letting untreated sewage into the mix, had created our unique London Bone.

As for the decorations, that, it was opined, was the work of the pit guards, working on earlier bones found on the same site.

"Blood, shit and bone," says Bernie. "It's what make the world go round.

That and money, of course."

"And love," I add. I'm doing all right these days. It's true what they say about a Roller. Little Trudi has enthusiastically rediscovered my attractions. She has her eye on a ring. I raise my glass. "And love, Bernie."

"Fuck that," says Bernie. "Not in my experience." He's buying Paul McCartney's old place in Wamering and having it converted for Persians. He has, it is true, also bought his wife her dream house. She doesn't seem to mind it's on the island of Las Cascadas about six miles off the coast of Morocco. She's at last agreed to divorce him. Apart from his mother, she's the only woman he ever had anything to do with and he isn't, he says, planning to try another. The only females he wants in his house in future come with a pedigree a mile long, have all their shots and can be bought at Harrods.

FOUR

I expect you heard what happened. The private Bonefields, which contractors were discovering all over South and West London, actually contained public bones. They were part of our national inheritance. They had living relatives. And stones, some of them. So it became a political and a moral issue. The Church got involved. The airwaves were crowded with concerned clergy. There was the problem of the self-named bone-miners. Kids, inspired by our leaders' rhetoric, and aspiring to imitate those great captains of free enterprise they had been taught to admire, were turning over ordinary graveyards, which they'd already stripped of their

saleable masonry, and digging up somewhat fresher stiffs than was seemly. A bit too fresh. It was pointless. The Bone took centuries to get seasoned and so far nobody had been able to fake the process. A few of the older graveyards had small deposits of Bone in them. Brompton Cemetery had a surprising amount, for instance, and so did Highgate. This attracted prospectors. They used shovels mainly, but sometimes low explosives. The area around Karl Marx's monument looked like they'd refought the Russian Civil War over it. The barbed wire put in after the event hadn't helped. And as usual the public paid to clean up after private enterprise. Nobody in their right mind got buried any more. Cremation became very popular. The borough councils and their financial managers were happy because more valuable real estate wasn't being occupied by a non-consumer. It didn't matter how many security guards were posted or, by one extreme Authority, land-mines, the teenies left no grave unturned. Bone was still a profitable item, even though the market had settled down since we started. They dug up Bernie's mother. They dug up my cousin Leonard. There wasn't a Londoner who didn't have some intimate unexpectedly back above ground. Every night you saw it on telly. It had caught the public imagination. The media had never made much of the desecrated graveyards, the chiselled-off angels' heads and the uprooted headstones on sale in King's Road and the Boulevard St. Michel since the nineteen seventies. These had been the targets of first generation grave-robbers. Then there had seemed nothing left to steal. Even they had balked at doing the corpses. Besides, there wasn't a market. This second generation was making up for lost time, turning over the soil faster than

an earthworm on E.

The news shots became clichés. The heaped earth, the headstone, the smashed coffin, the hint of the contents, the leader of the Opposition coming on to say how all this has happened since his mirror image got elected. The councils argued that they should be given the authority to deal with the problem. They owned the graveyards. And also, they reasoned, the Bonefields. The profits from those fields should rightly go into the public purse. They could help pay for the Health Service. "Let the dead," went their favourite slogan, "pay for the living for a change."

What the local politicians actually meant was that they hoped to claim the land in the name of the public and then make the usual profits privatising it. There was a principle at stake. They had to ensure their friends and not outsiders got the benefit.

The High Court eventually gave the judgement to the public, which really meant turning it over to some of the most rapacious borough councils in our history. A decade or so earlier, that Charlie Peace of elected bodies, the Westminster City Council, had tried to sell their old graveyards to new developers. This current judgement allowed all councils at last to maximise their assets from what was, after all, dead land, completely unable to pay for itself, and therefore a natural target for privatization. The feeding frenzy began. It was the closest thing to mass cannibalism I've ever seen.

We had opened a frontier in Old Sweden Street and had a couple of halfway presentable slags from Bernie's club taking the calls and answering enquiries. We were straight up about it. We called it The City Bone Exchange. The bloke who decorated it and did the sign specialised in

giving offices that long-established look. He'd created most of those old-fashioned West End Hotels you'd never heard of until 1999. "If it's got a Scottish name," he used to say, "it's one of mine. Americans love the skirl of the pipes, but they trust a bit of brass and varnish best." Our place was almost all brass and varnish. And it worked a treat. The Ritz and the Savoy sent us their best potential buyers. Incredibly exclusive private hotels gave us taxi-loads of bland-faced American boy-men, reeking of health and beauty products, bellowing their credentials to the wind, rich matrons eager for anyone's approval, massive Germans with aggressive cackles, stern orientals glaring at us, daring us to cheat them. They bought. And they bought. And they bought. The snoopers kept on snooping but there wasn't really much to find out. Livingstone International took an aggressive interest in us for a while, but what could they do? We weren't up to anything illegal just selling the stuff and nobody could identify what if anything had been nicked anyway. I still had my misgivings. They weren't anything but superstitions, really. It did seem sometimes that for every layer of false antiquity, for every act of disneyfication, an inch or two of our real foundations crumbled. You knew what happened when you did that to a house. Sooner or later you got trouble. Sooner or later you had no house. We had more than our share of private detectives for a while. They always pretended to be customers and they always looked wrong, even to our girls. Livingstone International had definitely made a connection. I think they'd found our mine and guessed what a windfall they'd lost. They didn't seem at one with themselves over the matter. They even made veiled threats.

There was some swagger come in to talk about violence but they were spotties who'd got all their language off old nineties TV shows. So we sweated it out and the girls took most of the heat. Those girls really didn't know anything. They were magnificently ignorant. They had tellies with chips which switch channels as soon as they detect a news or information programme.

I've always had a rule. If you're caught by the same wave twice, get out of the water.

While I didn't blame myself for not anticipating the Great Andrew Lloyd Webber Slump, I think I should have guessed what would happen next. The tolerance of the public for bullshit had become decidedly and aggressively negative. It was like the Bone had set new standards of public aspiration as well as beauty. My dad used to say that about the Blitz. Classical music enjoyed a huge success during the Second World War. Everybody grew up at once. The Bone had made it happen again. It was a bit frightening to those of us who had always relied on a nice, passive, gullible, greedy punter for an income.

The bitter fights which had developed over graveyard and Bonefield rights and boundaries, the eagerness with which some borough councils exploited their new resource, the unseemly trade in what was, after all, human remains, the corporate involvement, the incredible profits, the hypocrisies and politics around the Bone brought us the outspoken disgust of Europe. We were used to that. In fact, we tended to cultivate it. But that wasn't the problem.

The problem was that our own public had had enough.

When the elections came round, the voters systematically booted out anyone

who had supported the Bone trade. It was like the sudden rise of the anti-slavery vote in Lincoln's America. They demanded an end to the commerce in London Bone. They got the Boneshops closed down. They got work on the Bonefields stopped. They got their graveyards and monuments protected and cleaned up. They got a city which started cultivating peace and security as if it was a cash crop. Which maybe it was. But it hurt me.

It was the end of my easy money, of course. I'll admit I was glad it was stopping. It felt like they were slowing entropy, restoring the past. The quality of life improved. I began to think about letting a few rooms for company.

The mood of the country swung so far into disapproval of the Bone trade that I almost began to fear for my life. Road- and anti-abortion activists switched their attention to Bone merchants. Hampstead was full of screaming lefties convinced they owned the moral highground just because they'd paid off their enormous mortgages. Trudi, after three months, applied for a divorce, arguing that she had not known my business when she married me. She said she was disgusted. She said I'd been living on blood-money. The courts awarded her more than half of what I'd made, but it didn't matter any more. My investments were such that I couldn't stop earning. Economically, I was a small oil-producing nation. I had my own international dialling code. It was horrible in a way. Unless I tried very hard, it looked like I could never be ruined again. There was no justice. I met Bernie in The King Lyar in Old Sweden Street, a few doors down from our burned out office. I told him what I planned to do and he shrugged.

"We both knew it was dodgy," he told me. "It was dodgy all along, even when we thought it was mastodons. What it feels like to me, Ray, is -- it feels like a sort of a massive transformation of the zeitgeist -- you know, like Virginia Woolf said about the day human nature changed -- something happens slowly and you're not aware of it. Everything seems normal. Then you wake up one morning and -- bingo! -- it's Nazi Germany or Bolshevik Russia or Thatcherite England or the Golden Age -- and all the rules have changed."

"Maybe it was the Bone that did it," I said. "Maybe it was a symbol everyone needed to rally round. You know. A focus."

"Maybe," he said. "Let me know when you're doing it. I'll give you a hand."

About a week later we got the van backed up to the warehouse loading bay.

It was three o'clock in the morning and I was chilled to the marrow.

Working in silence we transferred every scrap of Bone to the van. Then we drove back to Hampstead through a freezing rain.

I don't know why we did it the way we did it. There would have been easier solutions, I suppose. But behind the high walls of my big back garden, under the old trees and etiolated rhododendrons, we dug a pit and filled it with the glowing remains of the ancient dead.

The stuff was almost phosphorescent as we chucked the big lumps of clay back on to it. It glowed a rich amber and that faint, rosemary smell came off it. I can still smell it when I go in there to this day. My soft fruit is out of this world. The whole garden's doing wonderfully now.

In fact London's doing wonderfully. We seem to be back on form. There's still a bit of a Bone trade, of course, but it's marginal.

Every so often I'm tempted to take a spade and turn over the earth again, to look at the fortune I'm hiding there. To look at the beauty of it. The strange amber glow never fades and sometimes I think the decoration on the Bone is an important message I should perhaps try to decipher.

I'm still a very rich man. Not justly so, but there it is. And, of course, I'm about as popular with the public as Percy the Paedophile. Gold the Bone King? I might as well be Gold the Grave Robber. I don't go down to Soho much. When I do make it to a show or something I try to disguise myself a bit. I don't see anything of Bernie any more and I heard two of the stodies topped themselves.

I do my best to make amends. I'm circulating my profits as fast as I can. Talent's flooding into London from everywhere, making a powerful mix. They say they haven't known a buzz like it since 1967. I'm a reliable investor in great new shows. Every year I back the Iggy Pop Awards, the most prestigious in the business. But not everybody will take my money. I am regularly reviled. That's why some organisations receive anonymous donations. They would refuse them if they knew they were from me.

I've had the extremes of good and bad luck riding this particular switch in the zeitgeist and the only time I'm happy is when I wake up in the morning and I've forgotten who I am. It seems I share a common disgust for myself.

A few dubious customers, however, think I owe them something.

Another bloke, who used to be very rich before he made some frenetic investments after his career went down the drain, called me the other day.

He knew of my interest in the theatre, that I had invested in several West

End hits. He thought I'd be interested in his idea. He wanted to revive his first success, Rebecca's Incredibly Far Out Well or something, which he described as a powerful religious rock opera guaranteed to capture the new nostalgia market. The times, he told me, they were a-changin'. His show, he continued, was full of raw old-fashioned R&B energy. Just the sort of authentic sound to attract the new no-nonsense youngsters. Wasn't it cool that Madonna wanted to do the title role? And Bob Geldof would play the Spirit of the Well. Rock and roll, man! It's all in the staging, man! Remember the boat in Phantom? I can make it look better than real. On stage, man, that well is W.E.T. WET! Rock and roll! I could see that little wizened fist punching the air in a parody of the vitality he craved and whose source had always eluded him.

I had to tell him it was a non-starter. I'd turned over a new leaf, I said. I was taking my ethics seriously.

These days I only deal in living talent.

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