

The
Metatemporal
Detective

Michael
Moorcock

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Acknowledgments

As a boy one of my favourite magazines, found in secondhand shops because it was at its hey-day during the 1920s, was *Union Jack*. It ran the adventures of perhaps the world's longest-running detective hero, Sexton Blake. One of Blake's greatest adversaries was Zenith the Albino written by Anthony Skene, a government surveyor whose real name was G. N. Phillips. These stories are in homage to my boyhood hero and are dedicated to Anthony Skene. He only published one hardcover novel featuring Zenith—*Monsieur Zenith*—published in 1936 and recently reprinted in a gloriously lavish illustrated edition, with all kinds of “extras,” by Savoy Books of Manchester, England.

The Metatemporal Detective is also therefore dedicated to Messrs Britton, Butterworth, and Coulthart, the backbone of Savoy Books. Thanks are also due to my wife, Linda, for her professional copyediting of this book. Further details of Sexton Blake and his opponents, together with a selection of reprinted stories, can be found at the Blakiana Web site, which I heartily recommend.

Michael Moorcock

FOR WALTER MOSLEY

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→ The Affair *of the* Seven Virgins ←

*Black it stood as night,
Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as hell,
And shook a dreadful dart; what seem'd his head
The likeness of a kingly crown had on.
Satan was now at hand, and from his seat
The monster moving onward, came as fast
With horrid strides; hell trembled as he strode.*

Milton
Paradise Lost

❧ CHAPTER ONE ❧

A Queer Visitor

In all his long career as a consulting detective, Mr Seaton Begg had never received a stranger visitor to his Sporting Club Square rooms. Though it was not yet noon the personage now languidly seated across the desk from him was clad in full evening dress, complete with cloak and silk hat. This alone was remarkable, but what was truly striking about the creature, who spoke with the faintest of educated Middle European accents, was that he was a pure albino!

From the visitor's bone-white skin stared eyes as crimson as the lining of his hat and cloak. Upon his long, delicate fingers he wore two rings, one of plain gold and the other some black, mysterious metal, engraved with the crest of a family which had been old and civilised before the Romans ever attempted—and failed—to conquer its land.

Seaton Begg felt himself in the presence of a great power—able to command the wealth of Europe, who smoked, after polite enquiry of his host, an oddly smelling little brown cigarette which Begg, long familiar with Limehouse, recognised as opium. This doubtless explained the man's languor, his slightly hooded, if sardonically amused, eyes which regarded Begg with a certain understanding. The albino introduced himself, handing his card to the famous investigator.

The ivory pasteboard bore a simple inscription:

Monsieur Zenith

The Albany

The hint of a smile crossed Begg's lips as he read the name. "You prefer to be incognito, your highness?"

"You are discreet, Mr Begg. I can see that your reputation is not baseless."

"I hope not, sir. By the way, as a fellow fiddle player, would I be right in thinking you are at present having trouble with your E-flat? A trifle sharp?"

The albino examined his little finger. "Just so, Mr Begg." He raised his right eyebrow a fraction. "I am impressed."

"No need to be, sir. An easily learned and very simple observation. The calluses on your hands are not, after all, dissimilar to my own! The rest was schoolboy logic. You are presumably here to seek my professional advice?"

"Exactly, sir." Whereupon, "Monsieur Zenith" dispensed with further formalities and launched, in precise, economical English, into his explanation for making this appointment.

Sir Seaton Begg's success was legendary. On more than one occasion he had been employed by the government of which M Zenith had until lately been a member. Blackshirt revolutionists had, with finance from a certain Great Power, succeeded in ousting the elected government and sending the king into exile. Now a puppet sat on the throne of Monsieur Zenith's mountainous land and a dictator, supported by foreign gold and arms, tyrannised a pleasant, if backward, nation, enslaving and destroying, creating dissension amongst people once living in easy harmony. Dr Papadakia had divided in order to rule. And rule he did—in a land drowning in its own blood and shrieking in its death agonies.

This, said Monsieur Zenith, was what any intelligent reader could deduce from the newspapers. What was not generally understood was how, to make further capital from his country's suffering, the Dictator and his bullies were in essence kidnapping prominent people and ransoming them to relatives abroad. On more than one occasion tortured, ruined corpses had been delivered to those unable or unwilling to pay.

"That alone is an horrific trade, Sir Seaton, I think you'll agree. There is a streak of ancient blood in our people which occasionally reemerges. When it does, such cruelties become commonplace. What Papadakia and his gang are doing is offensive to all we civilised men hold holy." The queer looking creature paused, lowering his eyes and drawing deeply on his little cigarette.

After a while he continued. "But now, Sir Seaton, they have devised a variation on their vile theme.

"They are blackmailing the king!"

Their puppet, a distant cousin of the legitimate monarch, had rebelled and died. But having succeeded so well in their obscene enterprise, these bandits-in-uniform had sent a message to King Jhargon the Fourth (with his family in Paris): "Unless he returns to my country and gives his blessing to the present dictatorship, so that the world might think them reformed, Dr Papadakia and his bully-boys would painfully and brutally dispose of a young woman every day. Virgin blood, they declared, would be upon the king's hands."

Long familiar with the world's infamies, Begg felt his own blood chill in his veins as Monsieur Zenith described the fate of the women, all members of his country's oldest families, who would die foully if the king did not return. It was a scheme of almost unimaginable fiendishness and Begg's loathing for the "fascisti" rabble informed the set of his lips and the hardening of his cool, grey eyes.

"You have my help in whatever form you desire, sir." The detective's tone had grown singularly grave. "Though I do not have the resources to start a counterrevolution in your country, if that is what you are proposing."

"Those ideas are being debated elsewhere," Monsieur Zenith told the detective. "And moves are afoot to oust the dictator. But meanwhile there are seven young women, two of whom are directly related to me, who will die dreadfully if we do not help them. Dictator Papadakia already has the seven under lock and key. They are imprisoned in the Martyrs' Tower, from which in olden times the famous Ziniski monks jumped to their deaths rather than submit to the Injinskya Heresy. Well, if you know that story you know that the tower is impregnable. Protected, they say, by Hell and History." The albino casually extinguished the remains of his drugged cigarette in Begg's ashtray.

"You are telling me that the position of these young women is hopeless, Monsieur?" Begg's eyes narrowed.

"Unless the king capitulates."

"Which he must not do—for the sake of his people and his honour."

"Precisely, Sir Seaton."

Begg mused upon his caller's appalling position. "Rescuing those seven

maidens would be one thing,” he murmured. “Ensuring that this foul dictator was ousted from his unearned eminence and foiled from committing any further evil—that would be another!”

Monsieur Zenith’s expression did not change, but his posture appeared more relaxed and there was a certain amused alertness in his strange, crimson eyes. “You are a man after my own heart, Sir Seaton. I came to you for advice, as I said. What would you suggest?”

Begg placed his elbows on his desk. He put his fingertips together and regarded the albino over hands that seemed poised to pray. “I have the glimmerings of an idea. But to explore it I must take a little time. And then, my dear sir, I shall require you to put me in your confidence on certain delicate matters. If convenient, I should be obliged if you could meet me again in twenty-four hours. Then we might discuss our plot . . .”

The albino rose, picked up his hat, and bowed. “I am obliged to you, Sir Seaton. Until I came through your door I had no hope at all. Now I have a little.”

“Your opinion is flattering, sir. I sincerely hope I deserve it.” With a quick, almost clumsy movement, Begg reached to shake the albino’s hand.

CHAPTER TWO

To Spin a Web

Less than four hours after his meeting with the strange aristocrat, Seaton Begg would have been unrecognisable as the clean-cut gentleman who had interviewed Monsieur Zenith. Not that his appearance was inappropriate to his surroundings, which were slovenly, the foulest kind of thieves’ den, and stank of a thick mixture combining opium, nicotine, alcohol, and fried food. The vast maze of underground chambers, some of which connected directly with sewers and other routes which formed the secret roads of London’s criminal intercourse, was known by the title of Smith’s Kitchen. Smith himself, a

seedy, corpulent individual who kept control of his premises by a mixture of blackmail and brute violence, was a kind of aristocrat. Although the police had sought to catch him over and over again, he had never been arrested. It was rumoured he had a hand in almost every kind of crime in London. He barred nobody from his premises, so long, he said, as they kept their noses clean. Deadly rivals met at Smith's, but they had sense enough to keep their grudges to themselves.

Begg's reason for adopting the disguise of a petty sneak-thief and coming to Smith's was to meet a particular creature who went by the name of William Duck but was generally known as "Dirty." Duck was considered disgusting even by Smith's regulars, yet for some reason he was party to the kind of information about the "upstairs" world of power, parliament and people in high places denied the most assiduous of modern journalists. Although suspected of it more than once, he was not an informer. But he knew the name of almost every prominent person staying on any particular night at any one of twenty London hotels.

Through the haze of smoke, Begg watched as a young girl got up from a table and made her weary way to the dance floor. Meanwhile Smith's band, an accordionist, a snare-drummer, and a violinist, struck up another dusty tune, and soon the crooks and their molls were in each others' arms, shuffling around the floor in a parody of pleasure.

In a doorway overhead a silhouette passed, then, stepping quickly down the rickety staircase crossed the room to where, in shadows, Begg waited.

From habit, Dirty Duck was incapable of anything resembling a direct route and approached Begg's table via the bar, where he bought himself a pint of beer, looking around as if for a seat. Only then did he make his way towards Begg.

All denizens of Smith's had a habit of talking softly from the corners of their mouths. The conversation between Begg and Duck took place in that style, using a whole variety of jargon and cant which, to an outsider, would have sounded like a foreign language. The exchange was brief. Money passed. And then, if anyone had been observing, Begg appeared to vanish. A moment later Duck had vanished also.

Only one party had taken an interest in the conversation. His head

moved to follow what had almost certainly been Duck's route out of the Kitchen. He wore smoked glasses and gave the impression that he was blind but, as his fingers flew over the accordion's keys in a lively Empire Medley, the eyes behind the glasses were deep in thought.

Half an hour later Begg had reverted to his usual smart appearance, his favourite "Petersen" stuck comfortably in the corner of his mouth, and lay deep in his Voysey armchair poring over a large book, a glass of single malt whisky readily to hand. From time to time he would reach and consult his latest International Airways Guide. Eventually he got up and put a gramophone record on his machine. Then, as the strains of Messiaen's *La Source du Vie* began to fill the room, he returned his attention to his books and documents.

When, that evening, his confidant and sometime assistant, the cabby Tozer Vine, knocked on the door of Begg's Sporting Club Square apartments, he was shown in by Mrs Curry, Begg's housekeeper. Begg himself was fast asleep in his chair, his pipe unlit, his whisky scarcely tasted. But there was a large pad full of notes beside him now and an expression of satisfaction on his aquiline features.

Begg woke immediately, as if aware of Tozer's presence. "Ah, the trusty Tozer! Did you get my message, old friend?"

"Yes, Sir Seaton, and I did just as you asked. We might expect delivery between eight and nine tomorrow morning."

"Excellent!" Begg was alert and fresh. He had long mastered the art of catching what sleep he could where he could, making the most of it. "Now Tozer, I want you to take an envelope for me and deliver it to an address in Whitechapel which I shall give you. You must not linger there and if asked you will deny any knowledge of the one who gave you the envelope. Merely say that a customer paid you to deliver it."

"Right you are, Sir S." The cabby's massive face split in a grin.

His red cheeks positively glowed with pleasure. He loved nothing better than being party to Seaton Begg's cases.

When the amiably ugly cabby had departed on his errand, Begg frowned for a moment and glanced at his watch. Then he settled back into his chair and returned to the Land of Dreams.