

Nicolas Collins  
*It Was a Dark and Stormy Night (1990)*

*Texts by Susan Tallman, John Hillaby, Peter Dickinson, E. M. Forster, Peter Vergo, Philip Broadley, Dorothy L. Sayers, Dick Francis, W. C. Handy, James "Son" Thomas, Jasper Johns, and Sarah Caudwell, as indicated; otherwise by Nicolas Collins or public domain.*

It was a dark and stormy night. We were all sitting around the campfire. I turned to Ben and said, "Ben, tell us a story." And Ben proceeded as follows:

It was a dark, dark stormy night. We were all seated around the campfire. I turned to Robert and said, "Robert, tell us a story." And Robert proceeded as follows:

It was a rainy night in Georgia, 'round about midnight. We were all hunkered down by the campfire, drying our feet. I looked up at Guy and said, "Guy, tell us a story." And Guy started up:

It was cold and wet that night. We were all shivering miserably around the campfire. I called over to Mary, "Mary, tell us a story." Mary shook the water out of her ear and proceeded as follows:

It was a painfully cold moonless night, crystal clear, beautiful. We sat in a circle around the campfire, making s'mores. I got up, walked once around the fire, crouched down, and whispered into Susan's ear, "Susan, tell us a story, a mystery story." And Susan commenced:

In 1945 in Amsterdam, just after the war, Han van Meegeren was arrested and accused of having sold a Dutch national treasure (namely Vermeer's Christ and the Adulteress) to the Germans (namely Goering.) It was the kind of thing that was happening all over Europe: citizens of formerly occupied countries were being charged with trying to profit from the war at the expense of their own nation. And seemingly they had van Meegeren dead-to-rights. He had certainly sold the painting. It had clearly been bought by Goering. And there is no question that a painting by Vermeer -- any painting by Vermeer -- is a national treasure. So everyone was taken more or less by surprise by van Meegeren's defense that he was not a traitor but a national hero, because the painting was not a Vermeer at all but a van Meegeren, that he had painted it himself.

No one, of course, believed him at first. An examination of the painting revealed that it was clearly by the same hand as the Supper at Emmaus at the Museum Boymans in Rotterdam: a painting from the same period of Vermeer's work, a painting well-accepted and authenticated by no less a personage than the great Dutch art historian, Bredius. Van Meegeren was insistent, however, and eventually the authorities allowed him to try to prove his point by painting yet another Vermeer in his prison cell. Which he did. The new painting was obviously from the same hand as the Goering painting, and the Boymans painting -- and the Head of Christ and Last Supper belonging to Van Beuningen, and Isaac Blessing Jacob in the collection of Van der Worm, as well as the Rijksmuseum's The Washing of Christ's Feet.

In fact, it soon appeared that virtually every Vermeer to have come onto the market in the twentieth century was in reality a van Meegeren. Treason

charges were dropped and forgery charges were brought, but van Meegeren died before the trial could take place.

The funny thing is that the van Meegeren paintings are all very ugly, and look nothing like what one thinks of when one thinks of Vermeer. Another funny thing is that the same is true of a handful of "accepted" Vermeers. One thinks of the light as being crystalline, always coming from the left, the air being still.... In van Meegeren it is more like a dark and stormy night.. [*Tallman*]

We were all sitting around the campfire. Han turned to John and said, "John, tell us a story." And John proceeded as follows:

Do you remember the sixties? That's when I decided to walk across Africa. Now this story takes place in Kenya.

Wrapped up in three cotton vests at the bottom of my pack I kept a little wireless set, made in Japan and extraordinarily efficient at picking up three, and almost only three, types of music. Europe and North America seemed to transmit almost nothing but rock-and-roll, augmented by peculiarly British Early Morning and Workers' Playtime type of bands. Whatever the repertoire the dumpty dumpty ditties were delivered at exactly the same tempo, encore et encore, ad nauseam. A twist of the dial brought in the wail of Islam, costive and insistent in North Africa, but enriched in the Sudan by full-throated recitations from the Koran. From Nairobi, the coast, and all points east came the cheerful, irregular songs of India in Gujuratic and Hindi, to me the most attractive oriental sounds of all.

One night, high above the Chalbi, I went to bed early, intent on hearing a retransmission of a Festival Hall concert in London, due to begin at half past nine. I tuned in to the short wave and turned the volume down to a mere breath of sound to dampen either a quiz programme or a spelling bee. The radio twittered on the floor about a yard from my ear and I fell asleep.

Shortly before midnight I awoke to find the blades of four spears outlined against the sky. The shafts were held by four young Samburu who were kneeling with their heads bent down over the radio. They were listening to the whine of a late-night dance band. Softly, I asked them if they liked it. They ran away. Calling them back I repeated the question. Was it good? Did they like the noise? In a phrase which I treasure, one of them said it was "asali kabissa," the very essence of treacle. [*Hillaby*]

They walked out into the dark night. I found myself unable to sleep. I turned to Peter and said, "Peter, tell us a story." And Peter said, "I can't remember any stories." "Then tell us a story about memory." And Peter proceeded as follows:

Hmmmm.....One is a crystal-gazer in the tent of time. Faint shadows move in a transparent sphere, and the lights must be precisely placed and precisely graded for one to be able to see them at all. Open the flaps, let in the sunlight, and one is looking at an empty glass ball. But now, having seen and recorded all there is by way of shadows, I can begin to compare my perceptions with the real world. [*Dickinson*]

Besides, it's still night, outside it's still dark, and the wind whistles outside this tent high above the Chalbi. It's time for thinking about the future, not the

past. So John turned to Edward and said, "Edward, tell us a story, a utopian story." And Edward proceeded as follows:

Once upon a time long ago or a long time to come, the Earth had become poisonous and people lived underground. While they had periodically been able to go up to the surface and have a look around, eventually respirators were abolished, and with them, of course, terrestrial motors. Except for a few lecturers, who complained that they were debarred access to their subject matter, the development was accepted quietly. Those who still wanted to know what the earth was like had after all only to listen to some gramophone, or look into some cinematophone. And even the lecturers acquiesced when they found that a lecture on the sea was none the less stimulating when compiled out of other lectures that had already been delivered on the same subject.

"Beware of first-hand ideas!" exclaimed one of the most advanced of them. "First-hand ideas do not really exist. They are but the physical impressions produced by love and fear, and on this gross foundation who could erect a philosophy? Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand, for then they will be far removed from that disturbing element -- direct observation. Do not learn anything about this subject of mine -- the French Revolution. Learn instead what I think that Enicharmon thought Urizen thought Gutch thought Ho-Yung thought Chi-Bo-Sing thought Lafcadio Hearn thought Carlyle thought Mirabeau said about the French Revolution.

"Through the medium of these eight great minds, the blood that was shed at Paris and the windows that were broken at Versailles will be clarified to an idea which you may employ most profitably in your daily lives. But be sure that the intermediaries are many and varied, for in history one authority exists to counteract another. [*Forster*]

"Each to tell us a different story, or a different version of the story. Peter, tell us a story." And Peter proceeded as follows:

That's all well and good, but it can be overdone -- think of some museum displays: musty with documentation, laden with earnest didacticism, any occasion for private meditation drowned out by the whir and clatter of the audiovisual program. Certain kinds of material demand so many layers of explication that one begins to wonder whether the game is worth the candle.

Consider an exhibition of medieval art, in which a significant part of the show is taken up with a display of illuminated manuscripts. Imagine that the organizers especially wanted to include one small item, a prayer book, rich in lapis and gold, exquisite in itself but with unusual marginal annotations, some clearly by a later hand. The book is tiny, the Latin text (medieval Latin at that) hard to read, the marginalia even smaller and more illegible. The marginalia, interestingly enough, turn out to be observations of a pharmacological nature, including what is unmistakably a remedy for syphilis -- though whether from a priestly hand or not it is impossible to say.

The book, as I say, is tiny. It is also extremely valuable, highly fragile, and susceptible to light. It would almost certainly be displayed in an alarmed showcase, behind armored glass, and exposed to very low light levels. It would, frankly, be virtually impossible to see. In order to reveal any degree of detail present in the original, our cunning designer would arrange for an enlarged

color photograph, of the best quality, to be displayed alongside the object. The Latin text, and especially the marginalia, would however still be more or less illegible, because of the handwriting, so it would be important to have a transcription -- nicely printed, of course -- which could be placed alongside the photograph. Unfortunately, since so few people speak Latin these days, it would also be necessary to have a translation, while a further text might comment on the historical significance of the item in question, the unusual content of the marginal annotations, and on matters such as provenance and dating.

At which point one begins to wonder about the fate of the poor little object, swamped by adjacent material so extensive, so much larger, so much more demanding of our attention. Is it really best served by such a manner of presentation? And if this wealth of adjunct material is really so important, does one need -- one dares ask -- to have the original object physically present at all? [*Vergo*]

Peter got up and went to look for more wood. Philip moved into his place, closer by the fire. John turned to him and said, "Philip, tell us a story -- scholarly, but less pedantic please." And Philip proceeded as follows:

Toward the end of *Gaudy Night*, Lord Peter is invited to dine at high table at Shrewsbury College, where the chief topic of conversation is naturally, women's education. The warden maintains that:

"Carlyle should have added women's education to his three great elements of modern civilization." Peter finishes the reference for her.

"Gunpowder, printing and the Protestant religion, isn't it?"

"You are extensively read, Lord Peter," she responds.

"A facility for quotation covers the absence of original thought, warden."

The warden smiles: "I think you are excessively modest. The apt quotation is no mere intellectual slight of hand, it is a form of wisdom." [*Broadley*]

If Sayers had been a more typical writer, the conversation would have stopped as a bolt of lightning shot through the Oxford sky, and the rain pelted down. It would have been a dark and stormy night. The kind of night I might have rolled over, sleepless, and wished for Dorothy to tell me a story. And Dorothy would have proceeded as follows:

That's not how I remember it. Toward the end of *Gaudy Night*, Lord Peter is invited to dine at high table at Shrewsbury College, where the chief topic of conversation is naturally, philosophy. The Warden asks:

"How would you define the philosophic mind, Lord Peter?"

"I wouldn't, definitions are dangerous. But I know that philosophy is a closed book to me, as music is to the tone-deaf."

The Warden looked at him quickly; he presented her with an innocent profile, drooping and contemplative over his plate, like a heron brooding by a pond.

"A very apt illustration," said the Warden; "as it happens, I am tone-deaf myself."

"Are you? I thought you might be," he said, equably.

"That's very interesting. How can you tell?"

"There is something in the quality of the voice." He offered candid grey eyes for examination. "But it's not a very safe conclusion to draw, and, as you may have noticed, I didn't draw it. That is the art of the charlatan -- to induce a confession and present it as the result of deduction."

"I see," said Dr. Baring. "You expose your technique very frankly."

"You would have seen through it in any case, so it is better to expose one's self and acquire an unmerited reputation for candor. The great advantage about telling the truth is that nobody ever believes it." [Sayers]

If this had been a real murder mystery -- if, say, there were a murder in it - the conversation might have stopped as a bolt of lightning shot through the Oxford sky, and the rain pelted down. It would have been a dark and stormy night. I would have turned to a real mystery writer and said, "Dick, tell us a story." And Dick would have proceeded as follows:

I think I told you about when my father died. I was at the hospital. I had vaguely expected Intensive Care to involve a lot of bright lights and clanging bustle, but I found that it didn't, or at least not in that room at that hospital. The light was dim, the atmosphere peaceful, the noise level, once my ears adjusted to it, just above silence but lower than identification. [Francis]

"What's it like," I asked, "is it terrible?" "No," he said, "because every day I forget a little more of what it was like before."

"Instead I must rely on the memories of others, the stories of others, as my past fades." Susan got the hint:

There's a story about the painter Gerhard Richter, who came originally from East Germany. He had studied at the Academy of Fine Art in Dresden, and at that time in East Germany painters were trained in Social Realism. Apparently Richter was rather good at it. I don't know if you know his work, but it makes sense that he would be good at it.

Still, at some point in the early sixties he decided to come West, and he was smart enough to realize that all his training and experience and knowledge about painting had absolutely zip to do with contemporary art as it was known in the West. So, apparently what he did in order to make up, was to buy the catalogues from the most recent Documenta -- the big art shindig they throw in Kassel every few years -- and, applying all the skills the Dresden Academy had provided him, he copied all the the art in the catalogues from the reproductions: paintings, sculptures, land works, films, performances -- he painted them all the same, as if there were no difference in substance, which of course in photo-reproduction is the case. I have no idea whether this story is true. A sculptor I know told it to me one night when it was dark and stormy. [Tallman]

Peter interrupted:

How do you even know what is true and what is not? How do you distinguish between real memory and invention masquerading as memory? Of course in my trade I frequently have to extract fictional impurities from the accounts of supposedly reliable witnesses, where, for instance, somebody has added a bit of shaping embroidery to a favourite anecdote and has then retold it so often that he can no longer remember not seeing what his tongue has got into



could produce, in short, the sort of thing that the speaker, while not professing to be an expert in such matters, would personally be prepared to call Art.

So Giovanni is instructed to do a nice Madonna in the style of Bassetti. His reputation spreading, he is commissioned to do similar work by other churches and by private patrons with the occasional gap between Old Masters on the walls of their villas and palazzos.

I should like you now to assume the First World War, and, as a result of it, many strange vicissitudes and reversals of fortune, leading to the disposal of a number of valuable collections. And when the collection of the Barone di Cuesto or the Conte di Cuello comes up for auction, and it is well established, on the best possible authority, that the Barone's ancestors had commissioned a number of paintings by Veronese, it is unlikely to occur to anyone that out of six paintings which all look like the works of Veronese one is actually the work of Giovanni Fabbro.

Assume now, however, the passing of the years and the development of more sophisticated technologies in the authentication of paintings: so that various collectors gradually discover that some of the great Italian Masters which they are proud to possess are in fact the work of an unknown twentieth-century copyist. What do you think happens then? Much crossness, I should think.

But then, my dears, when the dust has settled a little and the National and the Met are selling off these impostures for what they can get, it occurs to people that old Giovanni must have been rather a clever chap to do these convincing imitations, which have taken in all the experts for such a long time. So they start thinking that if they can't afford a real Titian or Veronese, a genuine forgery by Giovanni Fabro might well be the next best thing. With the result, dear children, that among a certain section of collectors forgeries by Fabbro become rather sought after and, in consequence, valuable.

It is not improbable. It's more or less exactly what happened with Van Meegeren. With whom the point has now been reached at which people are forging Van Meegeren forgeries. [*Caudwell*]

Guy dragged over another piece of driftwood and threw it on the fire. "That was good, Sarah, but it reminded me of one I'd heard before from a student of mine named Susan. The storm is still flashing and it's hours 'till dawn. Somebody tell us another." And David proceeded as follows:

It was a dark and stormy night. We were all sitting around the kind of thing that was happening all over Europe. No one, of course, believed him at first. Look nothing like what one thinks. Do you remember? exactly the same tempo, encore et encore, ad nauseam. A twist of the dial. The radio twittered graded, for one to be able to see them at all. Open the flaps, let in a different story, or a different version so many layers a remedy for syphilis marginal annotations less pedantic please Gunpowder, printing a bolt of lightning shot tell us I forget a little more difference in substance seeing what his tongue has Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog Do something else boring blank space, which would look much better with. Assume now, however, the passing of the years and the development of more when the dust has settled a little Tell us another...

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