Fame: or The Rise and Fall of Benny Liner

Benny Liner called me over to his table the moment I entered the Scheherazade. At first, I didn't recognize him. He wore dark glasses and a scraggy beard that appeared to have been stuck on by a third-rate Vaudevillian make-up artist. But the balding head, the tapering face and large pointed nose were his alone. A Cyrano was he who was thirty-five but looked forty and suffered visibly from hay fever.

We had first met in the third form. Together, after school, we had studied algebra and trigonometry, had quizzed each other about the lakes of America and the Kings of England, exchanged copies of Steinbeck and the juicier Erskine Caldwell, and later became infatuated with Mary Unger, a wide-eyed narrow-hipped lip-licking coquette of the first form. For four years, we were friends. Then the university separated us. I set sights on medicine; he went into architecture. He failed, turned to history and politics, defaulting in these through soporific boredom and loss of interest, and drifted, a rudderless vessel, into a pen-pushing position with the Department of Taxation. Then I lost track of him until his name appeared in the papers in connection with some scandal of which I had garnered a few disjointed facts. I had been engaged in post-graduate study in Cincinatti at the height of the affair and did not know the details.

After the initial formalities, during which he ordered an iced-coffee and vanilla slice for me, he took a pipe from his checkered waist-coat pocket, stuffed it with cheap tobacco, lit the matted pulp with considerable sibilant sucking and blew

white billows of smoke into the air. His hands were white and plump. They were also without hair.

'Well, I suppose you've heard,' he said, draping an arm about a chair and crossing one leg over the other in an attitude of indolence.

'Heard what?,' I asked

'You *are* a diplomat, aren't you?,' he said.

The smoke of his cheap tobacco did not blend too well with the coffee before me. I waved it away. Seeing my gesture, he smothered his pipe with the palm of his hand.

'Forgive me. I'd forgotten. You never were a smoker, were you?,' he said.

He paused, probed at some probable molar cavity with his tongue, then resumed.

'Well, I'm a celebrity, did you know? I've earned myself a small niche in history. I wanted the sun; and, man, I got it. I sowed, and as I sowed, so did I reap. I was rubbed lusciously with the sweetest honey, but taste instead of the most caustic tar.'

When I furrowed my brow at this flow of cryptic aphorisms, Benny Liner stopped speaking. He scratched at a patch of eczema at the root of his nose and sniffed. He bit his upper lip and seemed disappointed.

'So you really don't know? You really don't? – Do you have time then or are your patients hustling you?'

'It's my afternoon off. I have time,' I said.

'Good. Drink your coffee slowly then.'

I bit into my vanilla slice. Benny took a spray from his pocket, squeezed it into his nostrils and sneezed. His relief, as he wiped his beard, was immediate.

'It all started for one reason alone,' he began. 'It all started because I wanted too much. I wanted – in one word – to be famous.'

'Oh?', I said.

'Listen. – Two years ago, I was a nobody, a Mr No-name, a Mr Zero, a Mr Zilch. And it hurt. It hurt to realize that for all my thirty-three years, I had achieved nothing important.

Keats, you will remember, was already dead at twenty-six; Einstein was the same age when he changed man's concept of the universe. And then there were Newton, and Goethe, Mozart and Shelley, all men of genius, famous before even their first grey hairs appeared. While I, with half my life as good as over, all *I* had done was to ensure that the people's tax returns were in order and that no-one was getting the better of the Department. Surely – surely! – I had been destined for better things. My parents had, after all, survived Europe. I myself had recovered from meningitis, and once, when I was five, six perhaps, I was knocked down by a truck and had crawled out with barely a scratch. There must have been some greater purpose, some special mission for which I had been spared. Surely that was a fair assumption, No?

'Well, I had early on set my mind upon becoming a writer. And not merely of books, of those potboilers and throwaways that fill to nausea the shelves of every store like tins of tuna, but of sagas, *chansons de geste*, epics. Epics! In the lower forms, you will remember, I was a good student and already then I felt myself specially ear-marked for fame. My parents were not without pride on my account, their friends praised me, my teachers commended my talents, and everyone – everyone! – predicted success in whatever field I chose. And like silver to greed, their praise naturally honed my conceit all the more keenly. I filled my days with fancies. I sucked, as it were, upon the lollipop of fame. Of fame! Fame! Fame! Wherever I walked, the thought was always with me. Fame! Fame that made a man rise above his fellows, fame that made other men raise their eyes in worship, fame that tantalised and promised eternal life. Believe me, I could conceive of nothing grander.

'From where I lived, I often walked to Ormond Hill. There, the sheer ecstasy of creative thought soared its highest, for only from the heights can the eye grasp the vastness of space, the expanse of time, only from the heights can one comprehend the unity that underlies the innumerable tiny separate and scattered splinters of human existence. There, on my Everest, I was a giant among dwarfs. Ship's lights, port lights

and the stars winked at each other. Waves rose and crashed against the parapet below. Brisk winds sprang up from the sea and brought all manner of redolences to the nostrils and all manner of tastes to the tongue as from far away came also the sounds of motors and horns, sibilances and muffed echoes.

'Sitting there alone on the crest of my Olympus, I heard voices, saw faces – saw builders and destroyers, prostitutes and virgins; saw schoolboys and shopgirls, titans of business and toothless larrikins; and white-coated doctors and dog-collared priests, pimple-faced addicts and six-fingered freaks, and, in a hubbub as if from Babel come, they were whistling and shouting, taunting and swearing; and they were hissing and bellowing, and shrilling and shrieking. And as I watched and listened and contemplated that which, as it were, came before mind's eye, as in that wake I took it all in, I had a vision. They were bound in time, all those folk, they were bound *by* time – that was clear – yet were they simultaneously timeless. The present was a mere blinking, yet did even this mirror the eternal. For that which men were now, that had they always been, and that would they forever be; as they acted now, so had they always acted, and so would they always act; what they lived for now, for that had they always lived, and for that would they forever live. We had become modern, yes, we were masters – or servants perhaps – of cars and electricity, television, computers and all mod cons; our music, literature, architecture, engineering, art, one could argue, had advanced in diversity, versatility, technique and maybe in sophistication; but at the nitty-gritty level of human affairs, nothing – nothing – ever truly changed. Now, as always, a bronchitic child spent sleepless nights while its mother fretted, old men raged against the night and women everywhere sobbed and bit their lips over illness, disaster and death, all these recurring, all these recurring, as did carnivals and terror, rites of passage and rituals of grief, as did beauty and saintliness and malice and waste and splendour and decrepitude. All these, from Eden to the Black Death even to the present day; and from Cornwall to Melbourne to Japan. The eternal, the infinite and

the universal, each in the merest moment caught, each in the weest trifle identified.

'This, then, *this* was the world as I saw it. And none, our age being short on great minds, had in our own time yet fully captured the vision. Nor – so did I believe – had anyone yet effectively caught the gaping contrast between the heedless flow of time and the flitting evanescence of existence which both made meaningless and pathetic all our fretting, our ambitions, our very lives, yet against this, *despite* all this, charged every man and woman alive ever to create meaning, even to invent it if need be, for no other world but this could they ever know, and, if they were to fulfil the best of all that lay within them, only here, only now, in this life only could they hope to do so.'

Benny paused. He had been probing at air and now inverted his finger towards the table which, in turn, he took to prodding for emphasis.

'Both to present the world as I saw it and to fire others to give of their best – in other words, to inspire and excite and to elevate – these became my dual ambitions as I sat on Ormond Hill. And on such nights, I hurried home, intoxicated. My imagination burned. Not bothering to take off my jacket, I would sit down at my desk, take reams of paper from a drawer and begin to write. Words streamed from my pen; the ink was a waterfall. I breathed life into people, all manner of folk – professors, inebriates and seedy crows, and children, wastrels, braggarts and cretins. In those hours, believe me, which lasted well into the night, I was exhilarated, alight, alive, and it was in a state of ecstasy that finally I would fall asleep.

'But o, were such sleep, such sleep to last forever!

'In the mornings I read again the sheets I had filled with ink during the night. Gremlins, I discovered, mischievous sprites inhabited my drawers. For, in the more sober light of day, all I found of all my ecstasy were stilted prose, hollow phrases, a cornucopia of platitudes and, worst of all, not characters alive who moved and thought and felt but caricatures who didn't in the least bit breathe. How it hurt! Believe me! How it pained! I

wanted to give up, give it all up a hundred times. But to give up hurt even more than to continue, for the prospect of mediocrity and with it the dread of oblivion were alike past bearing; and I knew that, whatever the pain, whatever the agonising, the coming evening I should try again.'

Benny Liner rapped his pipe against his hand. A sprinkling of charred tobacco powdered the table. His nose twitched. He sniffed. Then he sneezed.

Wiping his beard again, he asked, 'Can I buy you another coffee?'

'My turn,' I said, calling over the waiter.

'I am telling the story,' he replied. 'I'll also pay for your patience.'

He pushed the sugarbowl towards me even before the coffee had arrived. 'I'll have another cup later,' he said and coughed into his plump white palm.

'One day,' he resumed, 'in the hold of a new idea, I left the office in a hurry. The day was cold and bleak, the kind in which icicles hang from walls. The wind blew viciously and the sky was menacing. People everywhere turned up their collars. The air tasted salty. And then, and then, the storm broke. Caught in the downpour, I ran for shelter in the doorway of a bookstore. Other people pushed past me. They were wet. Their breaths came out as steam.

'Seeing no early end to the deluge, I too went inside. The store was old and musty. On every wall, scores of shelves built to the ceiling held countless used books, their bindings dulled by handling, their titles faded, their jackets frayed along the edges. In its way, it reminded me of a graveyard. Just as there were dead people, so were there dead books; just as one-time remarkable and honoured men, once interred, became progressively forgotten, so too were the much-dog-eared books of the one-time renowned and esteemed buried, unremarked, under masses of other people's books or squeezed between others' tomes, or sequestered, out of sight, behind volumes penned by later, if also ageing and receding, authors. The contemplation of oblivion was a sobering one but that was one

fate I would not accept. There was too much in me, the crucible of ideas, of characters, of plots was too heated and overflowing to permit such annihilation.

'As I had nothing better to do while awaiting the return of calm, I browsed about the store. And it was then that something happened which took my breath away. I took down a book, a slim unprepossessing volume that had slipped behind some others, shook off its dust and began to read. Its phrases, passages and cadences made my cheeks burn and my temples throb. A flush rose to the very roots of my hair and I broke out in a sweat such as can only follow a rampant fever. For out of those pages emerged a modern Solomon, a Solon and a Nestor all in one who captured with the most utter conviction and art the truths I had hit upon on Ormond Hill. And suddenly, as I read, fame, fame, became a thing ridiculously easy to attain. Like a caprice, an idea came to me. One needed not skill but cunning, not a vision but daring. Its very simplicity made the idea seem ludicrous. And yet it could work; nothing was more certain.

'Where earlier I had waxed hot, my palms now became coldly moist, my fingers as though preserved in ice. I replaced the book upon the shelf but a magnet drew me back to it, drew me back to it once, twice, three times. For in it lay my whole fate and I could not let it go, I simply couldn't, although perhaps, perhaps it was fate that would now not let me go.

'And then the rain eased. The store emptied itself of its refugees from the storm. Icy gusts of wind blew through the store as the door repeatedly opened and repeatedly closed. The proprietor, who earlier had been content merely to sit behind his counter, now approached me.

'"May I help you, Sir?," he asked.

'"Yes", I said. "Who is this Miklosz who wrote this book?"

'He turned the book every this way and that as though he were looking for a light to illuminate the darker recesses of his memory.

'"Miklosz?," he murmured. "Miklosz? A Hungarian, I

would guess by the name. Strange. I haven't heard of him. Lord knows how long the book must have been sitting there. If you want it, you can have it for two dollars."

'Two dollars! Imagine it! How cheaply was fame to be bought! – I paid him the money. I could barely swallow. I hurried home, the book under my coat. I felt like a thief; no, worse, like a looter, a would-be murderer.

'For four weeks, after returning from the office and sitting at my desk well into the night, I worked upon the little volume. I sought things to change. But the story told itself. No amount of shuffling of characters, chapters, passages or events could improve upon Miklosz' work. What I did alter – names, locations, times – was more to placate my own conscience than to truly modify the text.

'Then, the manuscript completed – I still can't say transcribed – and typed and bound and parcelled, I hurried with it to the post-office. To dawdle would have been to risk a victory for conscience. The clerk, a red-headed pimply fellow with long freckled fingers, weighed my package, stamped it and, with a gesture that was at once decisive and irrevocable, tossed it roughly on top of a heap of other parcels. In that moment, I swear, I wanted to reach out and retrieve the package, ready to confess – *Mea culpa! Mea culpa!, Mea culpa!* – that the whole business was a mistake or a caprice. But the clerk was already counting out the change, and the matter, I decided, was now out of my hands. If I was destined to drown I would do so even in a spoonful of water.

'I didn't sleep, all the same. Nor did I eat. I lost weight. I couldn't write a single creative word. I became green whenever I thought of a distant editor detecting the forgery. I drafted letters to the publishers but threw them away. I thought of leaving the country. I contemplated suicide.

'Then one day, the postman, complaining of the flies and of his load, brought me the publisher's reply. My legs were jelly. I expected the worst. The letter was brief. In short, the publishers were pleased to inform me that the editorial board viewed my manuscript with particular favour. With my con-

sent, after finalising contracts, the book would be published during the following autumn and an advance cheque would be forwarded upon receipt of my affirmative reply.

'I was amazed, astounded, and, as you would expect, overjoyed.

'The book did indeed see the light in late autumn.

'The first reviews were a little cautious. The novel possessed a quaint old-fashioned and, at times, anachronistic quality, the critics wrote. It had to be admitted, however, – they added – that its themes were enduring and engaging and the author's handling of them so persuasive that to deliberately find fault in this work of a new and able writer would be to quibble over trivia. Later reviews proved more enthusiastic still. I received congratulatory and laudatory letters. My mother prepared a party for family friends. Past schoolmates suddenly rediscovered me. The fellows in the office patted me on the back. I attended meetings, went to theatre parties, was admitted into writers' societies, read from the work to discussion groups. For six months, I floated. My life had been rubbed with that proverbial honey.

'But where there's honey, so, too, are there flies . . .

'Last November, I received a letter. – You may want to read it. I have it here.'

Benny handed me a folded double sheet of paper which he had taken from an inside pocket of his jacket. He picked at his nose with his free hand.

'Read,' he said, placing the stem of his unlit pipe into his mouth and sucking on it with moist lips, 'I won't disturb you.'

The letter was written on pages torn from an exercise-book. The writing was thin and spidery and the script climbed upwards without regard to the lines.

> 'May I commend you on your extraordinarily fine work,' – I read. – 'How sensitive an artist you are and how splendidly you convey the sweep of history, the flirtation of the

universe with each man's destiny and the muteness of man in the face of his fate.

'Permit me here to append a personal story. When I was twenty-five or twenty-six – my memory has regrettably weakened considerably in the past fifty years – I possessed a vision, as vivid as sunlight, identical to that portrayed in your book. Out of this vision, an idea sprouted and flowered, shapeless bodies assumed form, faces peopled my imagination. All of these forced themselves upon me, begging me – so I believed – to record them for eternity upon paper. I hesitated. I had little talent. I didn't seek the limelight. I valued more the quiet life of a watchmaker, demanding little, content with mere plums. The prophet Isaiah, too, wanted no more than this. But God touched his lips and gave him speech. I wrote a novel. The work fell together easily. It took a mere five weeks. It was as if I had conceived it in a dream and, waking, it lay before me ready to be written. I was – or deemed myself – merely the agent of some mightier force compelling the work into being. It was published. But few people read it. The War had just begun; folk were distracted and where they sought diversion it was in the form of more humorous light-hearted fare than philosophic stuff. I wrote no more after that. I married instead, set up my own shop, collected stamps, raised children. And I seldom thought of that work of my youth – that peculiar somnambulistic aberration of my life – which, for all I knew, apart from a single copy in my keeping, had vanished from existence. It is true; I seldom thought of it until a newspaper review stirred my memory. And now, having purchased your book, I see my own work again, identical in all respects save for the names and places and lesser immaterial details.

'I have discussed this matter with my family. They have persuaded me that a double injustice has been committed. In the first instance, the work of my youth deserved a fate better than the past half-century has given it. In the second, credit for it is being taken by one who has usurped – that is their word, I myself abhor it – who has usurped it from its rightful owner.

'I regret to inform you therefore of my intention to institute legal proceedings.

I am,
Yours sincerely,
Gustav Michaels
(formerly Miklosz).'

When Benny Liner saw that I had finished reading the letter, he replaced his pipe upon the ashtray and sniffed and then blew his nose aloud. He would have done the first trumpet in any symphony orchestra proud. People looked around.

'Can you imagine it?,' Benny said. 'I swear I was a breath from hanging myself.

'Over the next week, I wrote letters to the Michaels, this Miklosz. Dozens of them. Scores. I pleaded with him to desist from legal action. I begged for pity, for clemency, appealed to his sense of decency. I offered him all the royalties, promised him a weekly income for life from my own pocket, he had only to nominate the sum. He didn't answer my letters. I telephoned him. A girl, her voice cold and impenetrable, answered but wouldn't let me speak with him. I went to his home but that same girl, his grand-daughter, wouldn't let me in.

'The old Asmodeus dragged me to court in the end. And, of course, I had no case. My lawyer tried hard to justify my action but even I failed to be convinced. Meanwhile, Miklosz sat in his seat, to all appearances oblivious to the proceedings. His face was flabby and expressionless. His eyelids drooped. He had a tremor in his hands and his movements were slow and jerky. Beside him sat his grand-daughter, a dark pretty girl with full lips and a dimpled chin. She had large black eyes that seemed to be laughing at some private joke. From time to time, she wiped the old man's mouth, adjusted his tie or gave him a sweet.

'I lost the case, of course. My lawyer shook my hand and said "Bad luck." Miklosz didn't even look at me. Upon hearing the verdict and the ensuing order for remuneration, he

leaned over stiffly towards his grand-daughter and whispered something in her ear. I despised him as I despised snakes. I cursed God for giving him life long enough to punish me with humiliation too mortifying to countenance.

'Outside the courthouse, newsmen and spectators gathered around Miklosz. He was leaning on a stick. He was being photographed. Reporters plied him with questions. He spoke with difficulty, in explosive jagged syllables. "I am not a writer," I heard him say. "I am but a mere watchmaker."

'I turned away. I had come alone; I left alone, disgrace a visitation that none was keen to share. But on my retreat, quick clattering steps pursued me. It was Miklosz' grand-daughter.

' "Mr Liner," she called.

'She reached me, her shoulder-bag bouncing on her hips. She panted. Small and compact, she could have been the old devil's pet rather than a relative.

' "Mr Liner, I am Teresa Michaels. We met when you called at our home. I am sorry I could not let you in. But Granddad, Granddad, he wants you to know, and he really means it, that he bears you no ill will."

'Behind her, still leaning on his stick on the steps of the courthouse, that bent unsmiling Mephistopheles nodded.

' "He wants you to know also," Teresa went on, "that he will not press for payment."

'I nodded back at Miklosz, silently wished a pox upon his head and turned my back upon on Teresa.

' "We can settle scores another time," I said and walked away to nurse my hurt alone.

'The scandal tumbled out of the courtroom into the streets and just as avidly into the newspapers. I was roundly denounced. Those with whom I had drunk champagne forgot my existence. The journals ignored me. Nobody now cared what I thought. My parents no longer dared invite their friends. My mother wept whenever she looked into my face. I changed jobs. And Miklosz was now acclaimed the genius. He had been so far ahead of his time, the critics wrote and pro-

ceeded to ask, what might he yet still have achieved had his gifts been earlier recognised?'

Between finger and thumb, Benny pulled at his beard, then smiled – a peculiar smile, an enigmatic smile, an ironic smile.

'Yes,' he said. 'I wanted fame; instead, it was infamy I won. Miklosz, content with oblivion, at his late hour became famous. A funny sort of world, don't you think?'

I had finished my coffee and set down the cup.

'And what do you do now?,' I asked Benny.

He scratched at the patch of eczema above his nose and fleetingly sucked a lip.

'Oh, I don't write any more, if that's what you're asking.' He shook his head. 'I've taken up stamp-collecting and work for a watchmaker.'

'That's quite a change, isn't it?'

'Things haven't turned out altogether badly,' he said, 'though I must admit it's scarcely what I had envisaged from the heights of my Olympus up there on Ormond Hill.'

He looked at his watch and then towards the doorway.

'Ah, punctual as ever,' he said, standing up.

A young woman was approaching. She was short, dark and compact, with big black shining eyes. She carried a shoulder-bag that reached her hips. She brightened when she saw Benny and blew him a kiss. They embraced.

'Meet Teresa Michaels,' he said, and winked. The balding patch on his head gleamed. He took off his glasses and his eyes glowed.

'Like I said. A funny sort of world, don't you think?'