

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/2

Vincent Mannings
THE CRITIC

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"Ah, Mr. Fleming, good chap. I'm so glad you could come." The man gestured at a chair as he talked. Naturally, he was a pup, much too young for the job, and unrefined, not drawn from the stock that the service once exclusively preferred. Times had changed, so Fleming was not surprised, but this particular pup seemed affable, at least, and he continued: "Take a seat. You probably know why you're here today?"

Fleming knew. Or he'd guessed the reason, this morning, when the invitation had come by hand to his beach-house's shabby front door. Fleming's tropical winter home was cozy, if ramshackle, a modest retreat about twenty miles up the road. It contained everything the gentleman author required: a typewriter, three cartons of French cigarettes and a generous supply of good, hard liquor. At dawn today, he'd heard a knock, and there'd been a brief exchange, two shillings for a slip of paper. Now, he sat down wearily in this young fellow's office, straightened his tie and waited.

"Mr. Fleming, you've been mentioned in certain quarters. Look here - "

The poor man appeared rather uncomfortable. He was seated behind a desk too big for him. "A drink?" He nodded in the direction of a small bar in a corner of the room, the full thing in miniature: copper counter, bottles, an oversized mirror behind shelves laden with every kind of glass. Fleming glanced at his wristwatch. It was mid-morning. Already, the air was hot and thick.

"Absolutely," he said. "A Scotch on the rocks would do very nicely."

"For me, too." The man exhaled loudly then rose to busy himself with glasses and ice; the fuss of it provided the cover he'd been needing, and he raised his voice a little. "When you retired, Fleming, no one gave permission for you to be writing *stories*." He stretched the last word out, tested it like he hoped it were something he might one day be able to snap. "Here," he grumbled, returning to the desk with two glasses of the finest single malt. "And do excuse me." With that, he pressed a red leather button and spoke through the gauze of an intercom: "Did the Colonel arrive?"

"Just now, sir."

"Then ask him to step inside."

The door opened. Fleming got out of his chair. The Colonel was old, dressed in civilian clothes. He actually seemed quite dapper; that is, thought Fleming, for people of his class. And though it was apparent the man's army days were long behind him, he'd remained a fearsome proposition. He was tall and broad, well-built, still perfectly comfortable with being the one in charge. Immediately, he began with the shouting. "So, *this* is the writer? *This*?" He marched toward his quarry, flashed a lop-sided smile then added: "I must say, you're shorter than I expected. Older, too."

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The shorter, older man was blushing. "Is that so?" he asked. "Well, my name is Ian Fleming. And you are?"

"I'm the one who's here to say we all must follow the *rules*." The Colonel stared. "Do you *mind* if I say this? I hope you *don't* mind." He bel- lowed, sneered. He'd come up rapidly and he stood now with his chin just a couple of inches from Fleming's nose. In his hand was a ruffled paper- back, a novel. His eyes bulged. He barely acknowledged the wet young pup across the desk, the wimp with his finger still on the red leather but- ton.

"Do I *mind*?" asked Fleming. He'd almost stammered, looking up at the man. His face began to sweat.

"Well, you don't see *me* selling stories," the Colonel said. He gripped the tattered novel in both hands, twisting it. "Do you? *Any* of us? Great *God*, must the enemy learn *everything*?"

"Indeed, no -"

"Good! *Very* good. It would seem that I am being clear."

Now, he brandished the novel, and he held it close to Fleming's head while he addressed the young pup: "What's the name of that *ridiculous* secret agent?" The pup had no idea. He simply shrugged his shoulders as the Colonel said to Fleming: "I can't remember, either; can you?" The voice was calmer suddenly, and the big man waited before he continued: "Per- haps it's best if we all forget his name." He tossed the book on the desk and then extended a large and meaty hand.

Fleming saw that hand but he concealed his resentment, kept his anger in check and presented a benevolent, thin-lipped smile. It was a default resort to timidity he'd acquired in nursery school and had never been able to lose. He gazed as if he were for a moment on the outside of his skin, saw his own hand reach up, watched as the hand was engulfed by the Colonel's great paw, the shake protracted and firm. And then he felt the other paw grasp his shoulder, pull him so that his right ear came within just an inch of the big man's vulgar mouth. Now, the Colonel could simply whisper:

"Go to the beach. Relax, Mr. Fleming. Enjoy your winters here; may they be restorative and happy." He paused, sighing: "And, of course, may they also be *many*."