The Case of the Ravished Romans

—Earl Kayser

THE LITTLE brown package lay on the table, a shaft of sunlight bouncing off the green twine which surrounded the strange parcel. It bore an Italian postmark, an address in Soho, and several oily stains. It could have contained many things, but what it did contain was driving Colin Parkes of the British Customs Bureau in mad circles.

"Stag movies? In the British post?" Mr. Macklin's black eyebrows reached for his balding head.

"Yes, sir," Colin nodded, "that's what the Americans call them."

The treading of feet and clatter of typewriters eased their way under the oak door and disturbed the air of heavy thought.

"Who is sending them?"

"We don't know."

"Well, then, who is receiving and distributing them?"

"We don't know that either, sir. They come to an address in Soho where no one lives and are apparently collected at night. We've intercepted several, then placed them back in hopes of catching someone. We've never seen anyone, yet the packages keep disappearing from that post box.

The Chief Inspector leaned back, hands covering his pot-belly. The creases of his gray pants were losing their sharpness and, by nightfall, they would again look as though he had personally crawled over and inspected every parcel that came through Customs.

"Just what are they pictures of, Parkes?"

"Sir!"

"I don't mean the details," he said owlishly. "Just give me a general idea."

"Well, sir, they're pictures of Roman orgies. The color is very good, if I do say so, and the women are quite . . . well . . . beautiful."
"Hmmm," said the Chief Inspector, as he attempted to conjure up visions of a Roman orgy—in full color.

At this same moment, George Tyrell-Dickson was making some more home movies of Roman orgies. Genuine Roman orgies.

"I wish I had more time per film run," he muttered to himself as he went about the business of making movies. A harsh cry from the steps nearly made him drop a roll of exposed film.

"George, honey dear, why don't you come upstairs for a few minutes?"

"Just a moment, Clothilde," he called.

"George?"

"Yes?"

"Why did you buy butter instead of olive oil? You know I've asked you to help me save money."

"But, Clothilde, I like butter."

"George, honey dear, we've got to save money. After all, you did quit your job as assistant to the ambassador."

"Yes, dear."

"And I only have 100,000 pounds to live on for the rest of my life."

"Yes, dear," said George, hoping her death might be untimely. He admitted to himself that his best bet for happiness lay in finding a quick source of income and a beautiful girl with whom he could fly away.

Three days had passed, and Inspector Colin Parkes was becoming frustrated. There were small purple marks under his eyes, and the black polish on his shoes no longer glistened.

"I'm sorry, sir," he told Chief Inspector Macklin, "but we've made no progress on the matter of the orgy movies."

"What about the type of film?" the Chief Inspector suggested.

"Eight millimeter, Kodachrome II, Type A. You can purchase it anywhere."

"The string?"

"Green wrapping twine. You can purchase it anywhere, too."

"What about the paper?"

"Common wrapping paper." Colin paused, uncertain
whether to continue. "Common except for one thing, sir."
  "What one thing?" the inspector demanded.
  "Well sir, there are some grease stains on the paper."
  "What kind of grease stains, Parkes?"
  "Butter, sir."
  "Butter?" The Chief inspector's eyebrows rose.
  "Yes, sir, butter." Colin's glum face fell another octave.
  "And the butter stains appear to be fingerprints."
  The Chief Inspector's eyes opened wide as he said, "And?"
  "And they're so smudged as to be useless."
  
  With utmost care, George moved the shutter release from its setting of "run". Opening the door on the side of the camera, he removed another roll of film. Then, after placing this into a small brown box, he placed a fresh roll of film into the camera and re-attached it to the black cube on the floor.
  "Now, you little beauty, make me some more pictures," he smiled as the unit hummed and the camera motor whirred. He had finally proven that one could breach time if one only knew the proper technique.
  
  George's eyes glistened for a moment as he recalled that stormy afternoon that had caused him to run from the cold outdoors to the warmth of his study. He'd wrapped himself in an old sheepskin rug and pulled his copy of The Time Machine from a high oak shelf. The calf binding seemed to caress his fingers, and the familiar passages were like old friends re-met.
  "Yes, sir," he had thought, "that chap, Wells, was certainly clever. Imagine being able to travel in time. Why, one could go anywhere; the battle of Agincourt, the signing of the Magna Carta, the birth of Christ, even a Roman orgy." His eyes closed in thought.
  "Suppose," George thought, "time were like a sine wave. Sort of a fourth dimension unit, with the forward movement of the wave being time?
  "Go ahead, you're doing fine," his ego said.
  "To understand it, you'd have to think of a whole bunch of side-by-side sine waves like threads in a piece of cloth. And, of course, there would be many layers of this cloth."
“Movement in space, then, would correspond to moving from one sine wave to another and yet another. Movement in time, however, would be in only one direction. Forward.”

“That’s just grand,” said his ego. “But if you can’t travel in time, then what good is the theory.”

George smiled. “Its value is that, although I cannot travel backwards in time, I may look back in time.”

“What?”

“It’s simple,” said George. “Light travels in a straight line. The light lines from one ascending portion of a given curve will continue onto the next ascending portion of the same curve. All that I need do is construct a device that will intercept them before they are blunted against the light waves on this portion of the curve.”

“But what about the descending portion of the curve that’s between you and these light waves you wish to catch?”

“That is no problem at all,” George replied, “because those light waves are 180° out of phase with the ones that I want. And so they will pass right through each other with little, if any, distortion.”

“Oh, I see,” said his ego.

“So do I,” chuckled George, as he drew out paper and pen from his desk drawer and began to plan the construction of his Photo-Chrono-Graph.”

And, the next night, his ears had really twitched as he pushed the button of his PCG unit.

“Goodness gracious,” he said, as the small eyepiece showed a riot of color and he was suddenly looking into a Pompeian house of Roman Empire days. It was quite a fancy house, too.

The weather got hotter, Chief Inspector Macklin became more critical, and Colin Parkes became more unhappy.

“Well, Parkes, how is the case of the ravished Romans coming?” was the Chief Inspector’s daily bon mot.

“We’re working on it, sir” was Colin’s only answer. His eyes had long ago lost their sparkle and his left index finger had begun to twitch.

“What in the blazes caused those butter stains? How did anyone get such good pictures? Why were they always a bird’s eye view?” Colin’s mind ran in circles like a hound
that has lost the scent. He twisted the wedding ring on his finger and laid his head on the desk. Perhaps his co-workers would think that he was resting his eyes for a moment.

Meanwhile, George continued making movies. He had long ago solved his problem of marketing his films when he had called a friend from his army days.

"Hello. Sam?"
"Yes."
"This is George Tyrell-Dickson. You probably don’t remember me, but I was in your outfit in the war."
"Dicky boy! Of course I remember you. What can I do for you?"
"Well, Sam . . ."
"Speak up, Dicky boy, speak up."
"Well, Sam, I’ve a product for you to market."
"That’s wonderful, Dicky boy. Whatcha got?"
"To tell the truth, Sam, it’s a bit illicit."
"Come on, Dicky boy, out with it. Is it pills? Commie-built guns? Dirty movies?"
"Yes, Sam, that’s about it. But these movies aren’t just common stag films. They’re Roman orgies and quite splendid."

Sam was silent for a moment, then said, “Okay, Georgie. I’ll tell you what you do. I’ll be in Naples one day next week and I’ll give you a call. What’s your number? You come over and eat dinner at my new restaurant there, and I’ll talk business with you."

And Sam had talked business. One hundred pounds of business for every hundred feet of film which George could produce.

"Think of it, George,” Sam had smiled, “eight minutes worth of film for a hundred quid."

George had smiled back, since the money would allow him to leave Clothilde and indulge in more attractive pursuits. Not to mention that it would guarantee his supply of hot-buttered muffins. And George dearly loved those muffins.

Another blistering week passed and Colin Parkes began having nightmares. He would dream of being seduced by a bevy of Roman slave girls and, just as he was really enjoying himself, a monstrously big Roman gladiator would charge
into the room and frighten the girls away. Then the gladiator would beat Colin with a mace and chain. Strangely, the face of the gladiator strongly resembled that of his boss and, each morning, Colin could not face his boss without shuddering. The chills that ran up and down his back would follow him until tea time.

George, however, slept quite soundly. He had neither nightmares nor cold chills. His only problem was one of angles. Photographic angles.

George had realized immediately upon making the final connections to his PCG that he might have certain difficulties. As soon as he turned the machine on, he found that he couldn't move it.

"Blast it," he said. Apparently, when I look back in time on a given sine wave, I'm restricted in spatial movement."

And, upon looking into the unit, he realized that he was looking straight down. "What will I do with this?" he wondered. "Not much," he decided.

But, as he continued watching, three or four servant girls came into the room and began cleaning and, apparently, preparing for a feast of some kind.

"That's interesting," said George. "Their costumes are Greek, yet this is Pompeii. Therefore, they must be Roman slaves." A few moments passed as George watched and then, suddenly, realized exactly what they were doing. "My goodness, they're preparing an orgy," he cried as he jumped up and dashed for his camera. Which was both dust-covered and out of film.

"Blast!" he said.

George had missed filming that orgy while he prepared a suitable mount for the camera and a binocular eyepiece for himself. The running time of the camera was only four minutes and ten seconds per roll of film, so he needed to be alert in order to change film quickly during periods of peak action.

"What beautiful, beautiful women," he would murmur to himself as he changed rolls of film. "How I wish I could be there. That one little pixie-like maiden would really make me feel good again."

He knew, though, that he couldn't travel back in time,
because one could never unweave the fabric of space-time from its predestined warp and woof. Yet the girl’s beauty haunted George’s thoughts.

To Colin Parkes, however, all women were losing their beauty.

“Blast it, Miss Wilson, I want that report typed today, NOT NEXT WEEK,” he snarled at his pretty blond secretary. And Miss Wilson found that her scrumptious figure had suddenly become a major liability.

Colin’s shoes had grown more lackluster by the day and the nails of his right hand had long since ceased to be of biteable length. Even his inspector’s cap with its bronze insignia had begun to crumple into formlessness.

And each day, like a storm of locusts, the same questions assailed him. “Who produced the films? Who distributed them? Why were they so blasted good?”

Then, like a parting of the waves, the movies ceased. They didn’t just decrease in number or size, they stopped coming altogether. And Colin Parkes knew that, surely as kangaroos have pouches, there would be no more little brown packages tied with green string and smudged with buttery finger marks.

“Yes, sir,” he said to the Chief Inspector, “I believe I’ve solved the case. That is, the traffic in film has ended.”

“What do you mean ended, Parkes?” Mr. Macklin had demanded.

“Well, sir, we caught a man lurking near the Soho address which had been the depository for the packages of film. He had been there every morning at post time and seemed to be getting quite worried. Then, one day, a big package arrived.”

“Go on, Parkes.”

“He had to try and brave his way through it, but his calm broke when he read the black lettering on the package which said that this was the final shipment.”

“Good, good,” the chief inspector commented.

“He’s in the gaol now, awaiting the magistrate, but he refuses to tell us the source of his film. He says that we’d never believe him and then keeps repeating something about it all being a timely matter, anyway.” Colin paused and
looked down at the small medal of commendation on his chest. "We don’t understand his comment at all, sir."

"That’s really immaterial, Parkes. You’ve done a fine job." Mr. Macklin’s black eyes glistened like black ball bearings as he thought of the good words of praise that had been his when he showed the results of the case to a certain high official.

That same night, George Tyrell-Dickson quietly drove his little green Fiat from his front lane. Luckily for him, he had made enough money to leave Clothilde before she realized his plans.

"What a beautiful night," he thought, as he drove down the street of the nearly deserted city. His one regret was that he had fallen in love with that little pixie of a slave girl who had appeared throughout his movies. He knew, though, that he would never see her again.

His heart had been doubly hurt when he realized that he was looking at Pompeii of 1900 years prior. And he knew that his love was not only hopeless, but that his loved one had died many centuries ago.

George drove onward to Rome and freedom, leaving Clothilde, two thousand years of cold lava, and Pompeii. Their memories would soon become whistles in the wind, but the servant girl would remain forever—a prisoner of time and harpist of memory.

And, later that night, Colin Parkes lay in his bed, a contented smile on his face and his wife’s warm presence beside him. Emily’s sleeping profile reflected the light from the window as Colin mused upon his boss’ comment of “Well done, Parkes. Well done.”

Then, the case of the ravished Romans filed away, Colin turned over and went to sleep. Tonight there would be dreams only of Emily.