DICK FRANCIS

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MICHAEL JOSEPH

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My sincere thanks for the
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The First Year

MAY

Gordon Michaels stood in the fountain with all his clothes on.

'My God,' Alec said. 'What is he doing?'

'Who?'

'Your boss,' Alec said. 'Standing in the fountain.'

I crossed to the window and stared downwards: down two floors to the ornamental fountain in the forecourt of the Paul Ekaterin merchant bank. Down to where three entwining plumes of water rose gracefully into the air and fell in a glittering circular curtain. To where, in the bowl, calf-deep, stood Gordon in his navy pin-striped suit . . . in his white shirt and sober silk tie . . . in his charcoal socks and black shoes . . . in his gold cufflinks and onyx ring . . . in his polished City persona . . . soaking wet.

It was his immobility, I thought, which principally alarmed. Impossible to interpret this profoundly uncharacteristic behaviour as in any way an expression of lightheartedness, of celebration or of joy.

I whisked straight out of the deep-carpeted office, through the fire doors, down the flights of gritty stone staircase and across the marbled expanse of entrance hall. The uniformed man at the security desk was staring towards the wide glass front doors with his fillings showing and two arriving visitors were looking stunned. I went past them at a rush into the open air and slowed only in the last few strides before the fountain.

'Gordon!' I said.

His eyes were open. Beads of water ran down his forehead from his dripping black hair and caught here and there on his lashes. The main fall of water slid in a crystal sheet just behind his shoulders with scatterings of drops spraying forwards onto

him like rain. Gordon's eyes looked at me unblinkingly with earnest vagueness as if he were not at all sure who I was.

'Get into the fountain,' he said.

'Er . . . why, exactly?'

'They don't like water.'

'Who don't?'

'All those people. Those people with white faces. They don't like water. They won't follow you into the fountain. You'll be all right if you're wet.'

His voice sounded rational enough for me to wonder wildly whether this was not after all a joke: but Gordon's jokes were normally small, civilised, glinting commentaries on the stupidities of mankind, not whooping, gusty, practical affairs smacking of the surreal.

'Come out of there, Gordon,' I said uneasily.

'No, no. They're waiting for me. Send for the police. Ring them up. Tell them to come and take them all away.'

'But *who*, Gordon?'

'All those people, of course. Those people with white faces.' His head slowly turned from side to side, his eyes focussed as if at a throng closely surrounding the whole fountain. Instinctively I too looked from side to side, but all I could see were the more distant stone and glass walls of Ekaterin's, with, now, a growing chorus of heads appearing disbelievingly at the windows.

I clung still to a hope of normality. 'They work here,' I said. 'Those people work here.'

'No, no. They came with me. In the car. Only two or three of them, I thought. But all the others, they were here, you know. They want me to go with them, but they can't reach me here, they don't like the water.'

He had spoken fairly loudly throughout so that I should hear him above the noise of the fountain, and the last of these remarks reached the chairman of the bank who came striding briskly across from the building.

'Now, Gordon, my dear chap,' the chairman said authoritatively, coming to a purposeful halt at my side, 'what's all this about, for God's sake?'

'He's having hallucinations,' I said.

The chairman's gaze flicked to my face, and back to Gordon, and Gordon seriously advised him to get into the fountain, because the people with white faces couldn't reach him there, on account of disliking water.

'Do something, Tim,' the chairman said, so I stepped into the fountain and took Gordon's arm.

'Come on,' I said. 'If we're wet they won't touch us. We don't have to stay in the water. Being wet is enough.'

'Is it?' Gordon said. 'Did they tell you?'

'Yes, they did. They won't touch anyone who's wet.'

'Oh. All right. If you're sure.'

'Yes, I'm sure.'

He nodded understandingly and with only slight pressure from my arm took two sensible-seeming paces through the water and stepped over the knee-high coping onto the paving slabs of the forecourt. I held onto him firmly and hoped to heaven that the people with white faces would keep their distance; and although Gordon looked around apprehensively it appeared that they were not so far trying to abduct him.

The chairman's expression of concern was deep and genuine, as he and Gordon were firm and long-time friends. Except in appearance they were much alike; essentially clever, intuitive, and with creative imaginations. Each in normal circumstances had a manner of speaking which expressed even the toughest commands in gentle politeness and both had a visible appetite for their occupation. They were both in their fifties, both at the top of their powers, both comfortably rich.

Gordon dripped onto the paving stones.

'I think,' the chairman said, casting a glance at the inhabited windows, 'that we should go indoors. Into the boardroom, perhaps. Come along, Gordon.'

He took Gordon Michaels by his other sodden sleeve, and between us one of the steadiest banking brains in London walked obediently in its disturbing fog.

'The people with white faces,' I said as we steered a calm course across the marble entrance hall between clearly human open-mouthed watchers, 'are they coming with us?'

'Of course,' Gordon said.

It was obvious also that some of them came up in the lift

with us. Gordon watched them dubiously all the time. The others, as we gathered from his reluctance to step out into the top-floor hallway, were waiting for our arrival.

'It's all right,' I said to Gordon encouragingly. 'Don't forget, we're still wet.'

'Henry isn't,' he said, anxiously eyeing the chairman.

'We're all together,' I said. 'It will be all right.'

Gordon looked doubtful, but finally allowed himself to be drawn from the lift between his supporters. The white faces apparently parted before us, to let us through.

The chairman's personal assistant came hurrying along the corridor but the chairman waved him conclusively to a stop and said not to let anyone disturb us in the boardroom until he rang the bell; and Gordon and I in our wet shoes sloshed across the deep-piled green carpet to the long glossy mahogany boardroom table. Gordon consented to sit in one of the comfortable leather arm-chairs which surrounded it with me and the chairman alongside, and this time it was the chairman who asked if the people with white faces were still there.

'Of course,' Gordon said, looking around. 'They're sitting in all the chairs round the table. And standing behind them. Dozens of them. Surely you can see them?'

'What are they wearing?' the chairman asked.

Gordon looked at him in puzzlement, but answered simply enough. 'White suits of course. With black buttons. Down the front, three big black buttons.'

'All of them?' the chairman asked. 'All the same?'

'Oh yes, of course.'

'Clowns,' I exclaimed.

'What?'

'White-faced clowns.'

'Oh no,' Gordon said. 'They're not clowns. They're not funny.'

'White-faced clowns are sad.'

Gordon looked troubled and wary, and kept a good eye on his visitations.

'What's best to do?' wondered the chairman; but he was talking principally to himself. To me directly, after a pause, he said, 'I think we should take him home. He's clearly not

violent, and I see no benefit in calling in a doctor here, whom we don't know. I'll ring Judith and warn her, poor girl. I'll drive him in my car as I'm perhaps the only one who knows exactly where he lives. And I'd appreciate it, Tim, if you'd come along, sit with Gordon on the back seat, keep him reassured.'

'Certainly,' I agreed. 'And incidentally his own car's here. He said that when he drove in he thought there were two or three of the white faces with him. The rest were waiting here.'

'Did he?' The chairman pondered. 'He can't have been hallucinating when he actually left home. Surely Judith would have noticed.'

'But he seemed all right in the office when he came in,' I said. 'Quiet, but, all right. He sat at his desk for nearly an hour before he went out and stood in the fountain.'

'Didn't you talk with him?'

'He doesn't like people to talk when he's thinking.'

The chairman nodded. 'First thing, then,' he said, 'see if you can find a blanket. Ask Peter to find one. And . . . er . . . how wet are you, yourself?'

'Not soaked, except for my legs. No problem, honestly. It's not cold.'

He nodded, and I went on the errand. Peter, the assistant, produced a red blanket with Fire written across one corner for no good reason that I could think of, and with this wrapped snugly round his by now naked chest Gordon allowed himself to be conveyed discreetly to the chairman's car. The chairman himself slid behind his wheel and with the direct effectiveness which shaped his whole life drove his still half-damp passengers southwards through the fair May morning.

Henry Shipton, chairman of Paul Ekaterin Ltd, was physically a big-framed man whose natural bulk was kept short of obesity by raw carrots, mineral water and will power. Half visionary, half gambler, he habitually subjected every soaring idea to rigorous analytic test: a man whose powerful instinctive urges were everywhere harnessed and put to work.

I admired him. One had to. During his twenty-year stint (including ten as chairman) Paul Ekaterin Ltd had grown from a moderately successful banking house into one of the senior

league, accepted world-wide with respect. I could measure almost exactly the spread of public recognition of the bank's name, since it was mine also: Timothy Ekaterin, great-grandson of Paul the founder. In my schooldays people always said 'Timothy *who*? E-*kat*-erin? How do you spell it?' Quite often now they simply nodded – and expected me to have the fortune to match, which I hadn't.

'They're very peaceful, you know,' Gordon said after a while.

'The white faces?' I asked.

He nodded. 'They don't say anything. They're just waiting.'

'Here in the car?'

He looked at me uncertainly. 'They come and go.'

At least they weren't pink elephants, I thought irreverently: but Gordon, like the chairman, was abstemious beyond doubt. He looked pathetic in his red blanket, the sharp mind confused with dreams, the well-groomed businessman a pre-fountain memory, the patina stripped away. This was the warrior who dealt confidently every day in millions, this huddled mass of delusions going home in wet trousers. The dignity of man was everywhere tissue-paper thin.

He lived, it transpired, in leafy splendour by Clapham Common, in a late Victorian family pile surrounded by head-high garden walls. There were high cream-painted wooden gates which were shut, and which I opened, and a short gravelled driveway between tidy lawns.

Judith Michaels erupted from her opening front door to meet the chairman's car as it rolled to a stop, and the first thing she said, aiming it variously between Henry Shipton and myself, was 'I'll throttle that bloody doctor.'

After that she said, 'How is he?' and after that, in compassion, 'Come along, love, it's all right, come along in, darling, we'll get you warm and tucked into bed in no time.'

She put sheltering arms round the red blanket as her child of a husband stumbled out of the car, and to me and to Henry Shipton she said again in fury 'I'll kill him. He ought to be struck off.'

'They're very bad these days about house calls,' the chairman said doubtfully, 'But surely . . . he's coming?'

'No, he's not. Now you lambs both go into the kitchen – there's some coffee in the pot – and I'll be down in a sec. Come on Gordon, my dear love, up those stairs . . .' She helped him through the front door, across a Persian-rugged hall and towards a panelled wood staircase, with me and the chairman following and doing as we were told.

Judith Michaels, somewhere in the later thirties, was a brown-haired woman in whom the life-force flowed strongly and with whom I could easily have fallen in love. I'd met her several times before that morning (at the bank's various social gatherings) and had been conscious freshly each time of the warmth and glamour which were as normal to her as breathing. Whether I in return held the slightest attraction for her I didn't know and hadn't tried to find out, as entangling oneself emotionally with one's boss's wife was hardly best for one's prospects. All the same I felt the same old tug, and wouldn't have minded taking Gordon's place on the staircase.

With these thoughts, I hoped, decently hidden, I went with Henry Shipton into the friendly kitchen and drank the offered coffee.

'A great girl, Judith,' the chairman said with feeling, and I looked at him in rueful surprise and agreed.

She came to join us after a while, still more annoyed than worried. 'Gordon says there are people with white faces sitting all round the room and they won't go away. It's really too bad. It's infuriating. I'm so angry I could *spit*.'

The chairman and I looked bewildered.

'Didn't I tell you?' she said, observing us. 'Oh no, I suppose I didn't. Gordon hates anyone to know about his illness. It isn't very bad, you see. Not bad enough for him to have to stop working, or anything like that.'

'Er . . .' said the chairman. 'What illness?'

'Oh, I suppose I'll have to tell you, now this has happened. I could kill that doctor, I really could.' She took a deep breath and said, 'Gordon's got mild Parkinson's disease. His left hand shakes a bit now and then. I don't expect you've noticed. He tries not to let people see.'

We blankly shook our heads.

'Our normal doctor's just retired, and this new man, he's

one of those frightfully bumptious people who think they know better than everyone else. So he's taken Gordon off the old pills, which were fine as far as I could see, and put him on some new ones. As of the day before yesterday. So when I rang him just now in an absolute *panic* thinking Gordon had suddenly gone raving mad or something and I'd be spending the rest of my life visiting mental hospitals he says light-heartedly not to worry, this new drug quite often causes hallucinations, and it's just a matter of getting the dosage right. I tell you, if he hadn't been at the other end of a telephone wire, I'd have *strangled* him.'

Both Henry Shipton and I, however, were feeling markedly relieved.

'You mean,' the chairman asked, 'that this will all just . . . wear off?'

She nodded. 'That bloody doctor said to stop taking the pills and Gordon would be perfectly normal in thirty-six hours. I *ask* you! And after that he's got to start taking them again, but only half the amount, and to see what happens. And if we were *worried*, he said pityingly, as if we'd no right to be, Gordon could toddle along to the surgery in a couple of days and discuss it with him, though as Gordon would be perfectly all right by tomorrow night we might think there was no need.'

She herself was shaking slightly with what still looked like anger but was more probably a release of tension, because she suddenly sobbed, twice, and said 'Oh God,' and wiped crossly at her eyes.

'I was so frightened, when you told me,' she said, half apologetically. 'And when I rang the surgery I got that damned obstructive receptionist and had to argue for ten minutes before she let me even *talk* to the doctor.'

After a brief sympathetic pause the chairman, going as usual to the heart of things, said, 'Did the doctor say how long it would take to get the dosage right?'

She looked at him with a defeated grimace. 'He said that as Gordon had reacted so strongly to an average dose it might take as much as six weeks to get him thoroughly stabilised. He said each patient was different, but that if we would persevere it would be much the best drug for Gordon in the long run.'

Henry Shipton drove me pensively back to the City.

'I think,' he said, 'that we'll say – in the office – that Gordon felt 'flu' coming on and took some pills which proved hallucinatory. We might say simply that he imagined that he was on holiday, and felt the need for a dip in a pool. Is that agreeable?'

'Sure,' I said mildly.

'Hallucinatory drugs are, after all, exceedingly common these days.'

'Yes.'

'No need, then, Tim, to mention white-faced clowns.'

'No,' I agreed.

'Nor Parkinson's disease, if Gordon doesn't wish it.'

'I'll say nothing,' I assured him.

The chairman grunted and lapsed into silence; and perhaps we both thought the same thoughts along the well-worn lines of drug-induced side effects being more disturbing than the disease.

It wasn't until we were a mile from the bank that Henry Shipton spoke again, and then he said, 'You've been in Gordon's confidence for two years now, haven't you?'

'Nearly three,' I murmured, nodding.

'Can you hold the fort until he returns?'

It would be dishonest to say that the possibility of this offer hadn't been in my mind since approximately ten-fifteen, so I accepted it with less excitement than relief.

There was no rigid hierarchy in Ekaterin's. Few explicit ranks: to be 'in so and so's confidence', as house jargon put it, meant one would normally be on course for more responsibility, but unlike the other various thirty-two-year olds who crowded the building with their hopes and expectations I lived under the severe disadvantage of my name. The whole board of directors, consistently afraid of accusations of nepotism, made me double-earn every step.

'Thank you,' I said neutrally.

He smiled a shade. 'Consult,' he said, 'whenever you need help.'

I nodded. His words weren't meant as disparagement. Everyone consulted, in Ekaterin's, all the time. Com-

munication between people and between departments was an absolute priority in Henry Shipton's book, and it was he who had swept away a host of small-room offices to form opened-up expanses. He himself sat always at one (fairly opulent) desk in a room that contained eight similar, his own flanked on one side by the vice-chairman's and on the other by that of the head of Corporate Finance. Further senior directors from other departments occupied a row of like desks opposite, all of them within easy talking earshot of each other.

As with all merchant banks, the business carried on by Ekaterin's was different and separate from that conducted by the High Street chains of clearing banks. At Ekaterin's one never actually saw any money. There were no tellers, no clerks, no counters, no paying-ins, no withdrawals and hardly any cheque books.

There were three main departments, each with its separate function and each on its own floor of the building. Corporate Finance acted for major clients on mergers, takeovers and the raising of capital. Banking, which was where I worked with Gordon, lent money to enterprise and industry. And Investment Management, the oldest and largest department, aimed at producing the best possible returns from the vast investment funds of charities, companies, pensions, trusts and trade unions.

There were several small sections like Administration, which did everyone's paperwork; like Property, which bought, sold, developed and leased; like Research, which dug around; like Overseas Investments, growing fast, and like Foreign Exchange, where about ten frenetic young wizards bought and sold world currencies by the minute, risking millions on decimal point margins and burning themselves out by forty.

The lives of all the three hundred and fifty people who worked for Ekaterin's were devoted to making money work. To the manufacture, in the main, of business, trade, industry, pensions and jobs. It wasn't a bad thing to be convinced of the worth of what one did, and certainly there was a tough basic harmony in the place which persisted unruffled by the surface tensions and jealousies and territorial defences of everyday office life.