

CONFERENCE-VILLE

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FRANK MOORHOUSE



For Sandra Levy

*All characters in this book are
entirely fictitious, and no reference
is intended to any living person.*

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As well as seven published books of stories he has written fiction and commentary of Australian life for magazines and newspapers in Australia and overseas, including Germany and France. He has also scripted several films including *Between Wars* and *The Everlasting Secret Family*.

Also by Frank Moorhouse in this series:

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I N - F L I G H T
S A D I S M

January, 1976

THE AIR HOSTESS stood before me with a tray of drinks and said my name as a question.

I was confused by her knowing my name.

“Yes?”

“A gentleman, a Mr Tateham, would like to buy you a drink.”

“Oh! . . . fine . . . but . . .”

I knew no Mr Tateham. A gratified reader? I’ve been recognised?

“. . . would you point him out?”

I unbelted and stood up as well as you can in an aircraft and looked down the seated people.

The person beside me was interested.

The hostess pointed out my benefactor. He was lifting his glass in greeting.

It was Markham, not Tateham. A letdown.

I moved down and joined him.

Markham, professor or reader now? The last time I saw him was over a year ago. He did an ambiguous review of my book. We have never been companions. Just parallel people.

I’d really like a double bourbon. Against the ethos of the shout, the old days, poor days; that ethos still comes to me — you drink what the other person is drinking. We all drank beer in those days. Now, first class on expenses.

“I’m opening discussion on you,” he said.

Well. Unsettling. “You?”

“Yes,” he said. “Rosemary had to pull out at the last minute.”

“I’ll break the ethos of the shout,” I said, grinning to

cover the disturbance I felt about this news, "and order a double bourbon."

"They're double nip bottles," he said, showing up his experience as an air traveller.

Was the purpose of the drink to pick at my paper? Although I had no firmed, expressible description of Markham's personality, I remembered one thing clearly, he was a conversational sadist and I did not like the idea of him opening discussion on my conference paper at all.

Well, what? What did he think of the paper? I waited for his reaction.

"I saw Ray Mathew when I was on sabbatical," he said. Stuff Ray Mathew.

"I didn't know him."

"He's living with a rich woman in New York."

"His work doesn't seem to get here. I don't see his stories, anything."

"He hasn't done much recently."

"He was a star."

"He was the darling of the literary scene in the late fifties. He broke new ground."

I said I had recently found a new copy of *Bohemian Affair* in a bookshop where it had been on the shelf for twenty years. The price was in £sd. But what about my paper damn you.

"I don't think those early books of his have a continuity beyond the time he wrote them," Markham said. "I suppose it can happen to any writer. No one reads him now."

He meant me. It could happen to me. Not yet the darling, not yet unread.

I chattered on, but damned Markham had set my mind on an anxious literary introspection . . . will my other books be just obsessional pacing over the same initial life experiences . . . or attempts to reproduce what has succeeded earlier . . . worse, self-conscious attempts to "break" with the preoccupations of earlier

work ... rationally conceived fiction ... no heat ... no madness.

I had to stop myself. I was doing Markham's bidding — self-torment. I stopped myself.

He began to talk about his wife and her sexual behavior. I recalled this also. That the last time we met he had told me deep and personal things about his wife. As if trying to show that professors, or whatever he was now, could lead colorful sex lives.

I had no way of assessing Markham's confessional, his family gossip. Maybe he resented fiction and wanted to outrun it, I had no reason though to doubt the truth of his revelations, I hadn't met his wife, I had no reference points to his life.

"My wife is into a strange scene," he said. "You'll be interested in what she's into now."

Curiously, it was the story I'd heard last time, a year ago. Which didn't make it untrue, probably authenticated it. But it did make it sound atypical of his life, more singular than he would want me to believe. I'm sure he wanted to give me an impression of a cavalcade of sexual adventure.

"She has another man. I knew that. I can accommodate that. Then one day I came home with a heavy cold and found them both in bed."

The detail was identical to that he had told me a year before. Heavy cold and all.

"Accidentally," he continued, "finding them in bed — to our mutual disconcertment. Before I could employ my savoir faire and get them both a drink, my wife says 'Get your gear off'. She wanted a threesome. Here she is a Monte Sant'Angelo girl and she wants a threesome. I obliged. Heavy cold forgotten."

"It's bad manners to make love with a cold," I said, having nothing to say.

"What?"

Perhaps he was tantalising me. Tantalisation could be a

branch of his conversational sadism.

He went into lubricous detail which always startles me, even though I was used to it in fiction, it always startles me when it comes from the mouth of a person who is always so formal towards the world. People, like Markham, who slip out of role.

"You don't have to worry about performance — when you reach the critical stage, the other fellow takes over. Increases sexual intensity, it's a whole other dimension."

I had further trouble finding something to say, but said, "I don't like the idea of there being the possibility of discussion."

"How's that?" He was short, it must not have been the response he was after.

"I mean, while one is out of the room the others could discuss him or her. With only two people the intimacy is, well, sealed."

Privately, I had no opinions at all on threesomes.

Markham looked out the porthole and then looked for the hostess. He was dissatisfied with my reaction, I had not jaw-dropped or shown burning envy. Good.

Why didn't he say anything about my paper?

I said finally, "Well, what are you going to say about my paper?"

He toyed with his drink. I knew I shouldn't have asked.

"What Dr Johnson said of Milton."

I did not know what Johnson said of Milton. If I had read it, I no longer remembered. His smile cut me off from pushing any further. To push further would be self-abasing.

He had me hanging on a hook but I swam on as if I couldn't feel it, and talked about other things.

"There may be no conference anyhow," he said, a little later on.

"How do you mean?" I said, taking another hook. Gritting myself against his conversational style which always forced me to ask another question, put me into

conversational dependency.

“Not in its present format.”

“Why?”

“Some want formal papers dropped and the whole thing to go into self-initiating project groups.”

“Self-initiating project groups?”

I’d spent three weeks working on my paper.

“A technique for which I have a great deal of respect.”

He always did have an odor of trendiness.

So what about my paper.

I knew I shouldn’t have joined Markham. It had all come back to me now. It was always a bed of nails. I should have stayed in my own seat and drifted into somnolence.

We sat now for a time in silence. I didn’t want to say anything, didn’t want to hear anything else from him.

We were coming into the airport now, thank God.

I did realise, guiltily, that I had been spontaneously against “self-initiating project groups”. Partly, I realised, because of my personal investment in the standard conference arrangements. But there was also in there somewhere a resistance to *change*. I wanted to think I was against it for intellectual reasons coming out of my experience. I said, for instance, that it was probably a tactic of a group which wanted to manage the conference for its own posturing, radical faddism and aggressive simplicities. But I couldn’t escape the accusation that my resistance to the idea had been uncritical. The ugly old man who was the twin of the “uncritical embrace”.

“Where are you staying?” Markham asked as we landed.

“Park Royal.”

“So am I.”

“They said they’d send a car,” Markham said.

We travelled in a government car with Henry Mayer, Albie Thoms and Charles Teake.

Privileged people.

There was talk in the car about Friedman, a childhood friend from my home town, who'd recently been dismissed. There'd been no public statement. According to Markham it was because Friedman had accepted a contra-deal with one of the airlines. Markham referred to Friedman as a "lightweight" — one of his favorite expressions.

I didn't believe Markham knew anything about it. But nor did I.

Henry Mayer didn't think that the conference would be disrupted.

In my motel room I poured myself a beer. I was crawling with restlessness from my talk with Markham. You certainly paid for any free drink Markham bought. But allowing it to rankle afterwards, in his absence, was additionally vexing.

I tiredly played with my possible position on "self-initiating project groups" and any action to restructure the conference. My initial resistance did wear itself out and was replaced by a weak "open" position.

So here I was. The eve of the conference, my paper in the hands of an intellectual sadist, with the possibility that there would *be* no conference. Maybe this would be the last conference ever held, or perhaps the last speaking invitation I ever got, or a public exposure of my pretended knowledge, a personal devastation, a devastating insight into the uselessness of "discussion". Or just another conference.

And one of Markham's other statements, damn him, came back and worried at my mind, which the beer did not easily wash away — "he was a darling of the literary world but no one reads him now".

C L A S S
W A R F A R E
I N T H E
B A R - B I S T R O

IN THE MOTEL'S Hawaiian bar, I felt calmed after the agitation of the flight. The motel's Hawaiian bar took away a flush of overconsciousness that I had. The Hawaiian make-believe was pleasantly depersonalising, that is, made me feel slightly that I was someone else — a person out of an advertisement, say. Yet it was so stereotyped as to be *familiar*, which helped.

I could actually make myself feel as if the invitation of the motel directory "to relax in our exotic Hawaiian bar" was working. But I was still, though distanced, still aware that Australia, the conference and its demands were just out there on the street.

I pulled out Anthony Powell's *Temporary Kings*. You always offend the sociability of the bar by reading. On our egalitarian scale though, I suppose, Powell was less unacceptable to read in a bar than say Proust. Anyhow, I hoped to be joined by a few of the other conference people before long, old faces from other cities, old gunfighters from past conferences, although it crossed my mind that perhaps I was in the wrong bar.

But no, Eric Bottral came up to me, heartily shoving my shoulder, picking up my book to see the title and putting it down with a comment about "highbrow". I was pleased to see him.

I said, "You and Jack must be earning more from talking at conferences than from your unions."

"I swear each bloody time that it will be the last. A middle class wank they are."

He ordered a double scotch and turned back to me, "And good luck to Jack — he's a great lad."

Eric was out of the English shop steward movement but