

PRINCESS DIANA'S REVENGE

In a full and varied life Michael de Larrabeiti has worked in the film industry, as a travel guide in France and Morocco, as a shepherd in Provence, as an English teacher in Casablanca and as a travel journalist for the Sunday Times. He read French and English at Trinity College, Dublin, won a scholarship to the École Normale Supérieure, Paris and began a D.Phil at Oxford which he abandoned to take up writing full-time.

He is the author of the much admired *Borrible Trilogy*, recently reissued, as well as several other books. He has three grown-up daughters and lives in Oxfordshire.

Critical reaction to some of Michael de Larrabeiti's previous work

THE BORRIBLES

‘...deadly glint and sophisticated appeal.’

Kirkus

‘London’s answer to *The Lord of the Rings*...try *The Borribles*, warts and all, before they become a legend.’

The Times

‘...the offspring of a singular imagination.’

The New York Times

‘...Larrabeiti has written a modern epic.’

Publishers' Weekly

‘...this juvenile *Clockwork Orange* projects a gripping story through slam-bang action.’

Los Angeles Times

‘It’s stuff as strong as Fagin’s underworld. Dickens would have approved of this book.’

Evening Standard

A ROSE BEYOND THE THAMES

‘...a beautifully warm, inventively true book.’

The Guardian

‘...the whole thing is a tour de force.’

The Sunday Times

Critical reaction to some of Michael de Larrabeiti's previous work

FOXES' OVEN

'A dark story with overtones of Ian McEwan's
Atonement...keeps you enthralled.'

The Guardian

'It is so well done...Michael de Larrabeiti's book is of a
high literary standard.'

Beryl Bainbridge

'Compelling and atmospheric.'

John Carey, The Sunday Times

THE BUNCE

'Craftsmanship, style, imagination and intelligence
make this an enjoyable, sometimes alarming novel.'

Time Out

'...rich in comic life...there are escapades galore,
vicious, lewd, hilarious...crime as vaudeville.'

The Guardian

'The plot roars off on a lurching-retching roller-
coaster...hurtling pace, sharp tin-tack writing.'

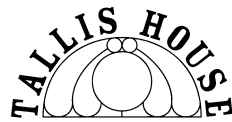
The Observer

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Michael de Larrabeiti



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*For the inhabitants of Great Milton, past, present and future,
in friendship and affection.*

“Art is the lie that makes us realize the truth.”
Pablo Picasso

'Death is down every side-street, just waiting,' Joe spoke out loud even though he was alone. He often did. He should have been feeling happy, joyful even, but he wasn't. He'd filmed in a coal mine once, three months, and the longer he'd spent underground the more frightened he'd felt every time he came out, scared of space. That feeling was with him now and he couldn't move because of it. So he stood where he was.

They'd given him a hard time in prison and they might not have finished with him yet, which only made him miss the closeness of his cell walls and the smell of unwashed bodies even more; he had got used to claustrophobia, come to welcome it, but now an emptiness surrounded him and made him vulnerable. Anything could come from anywhere, from the far side of the cosmos, asteroids aiming for his skull.

Joe spoke again. 'I've seen too many old gangster films, that's my trouble.' He was standing in the black shadows not far from the prison gates. He'd watched hundreds of those films during his time in Wandsworth. Black and white, like the night around him, beautifully lit, glossy pools of dark awash with silver lamplight, everything he dreaded lurking in the shadows – "les films noirs." 'Gilda' with Rita Hayworth; 'The Glass Key' with Alan Ladd.

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If the films had been based in truth there should be a car waiting for him, a long-nosed limousine, one of those old Packards from prohibition days, an elegant hand beckoning him in, the luxurious smell of leather seats, a beautiful woman, his for the taking, a fortune in cash on offer, and thanks expressed for the favours he'd done, and a rich life stretching away in front of him, as smooth as an aristocratic lawn, green pastures for ever, as soft and as tasty as peppermint ice-cream. Dream away Joe. He was broke and the streets were deserted. If there'd been a sound the walls would have echoed, but they didn't. Not even a black cat in the lamplight. He dreamt too much. He shrugged his shoulders and hefted the small attaché case that contained all he owned. It weighed nothing but there was nothing in it but a change of clothing. He walked towards the street lamps and turned towards Magdalen Road, or was it Burntwood Lane, he couldn't remember. The longed for car didn't come, but then no one cared if he was inside prison or out of it, alive or dead. Well, maybe one person, the one person who really would like to see him dead.

He walked on. Perhaps he'd pick up a night bus on Trinity Road, but one thing was certain, he had to book in at the hostel in Kingston by the next day. It was a condition of his parole. And just as important was the probation officer to see once a month. How he'd like to board a bus and simply say: 'A single to the end of the world, please driver, and no return.'

He was alone. Geraldine had divorced him two years before and there were no children. Even if he'd spawned a tribe of kids they wouldn't have wanted him – a failure who had spent no time with them. He laughed like a tinful of nails. Kids who didn't exist and still they despised him. The loneliness was bitter and again Joe yearned to be back in his cell, warmed by the light, comforted by the routine.

Then the car came, a black Mercedes. It pulled into the gutter beside him. It shone like anthracite. Along the pavement were the fences and walls and the houses of Magdalen Road, proper houses with proper people in them; a leafy part of Wandsworth. The front passenger door of the Mercedes swung open and a man's voice said, 'Get in, Rapps.'

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Joe knew who it was. There was every chance that if he got into the car he wouldn't get out alive. He'd been wishing for a role in a black and white film, but not this role. Only one person in the world would send for him, the one person he didn't want to see; you could trust life to spit in your eye, and here it was, spitting. A man in a black sweater got out of the rear nearside door, came up close to Joe and pushed him hard.

'Get in,' he said.

Joe did as he was told, sat next to the driver, and placed his case on his knee. The door was slammed and the man in the sweater got back into the car. Joe looked to his right, but he knew who was sitting there – 'Sunshine' Leary. The man in the sweater was his brother, Ralph.

Sunshine switched off the engine and leant further back into his seat, staring through the windscreen.

'I could have had you killed in there.' He tilted his head in the direction of the prison. 'Should have.' His voice was rough, a throat of sandpaper. Joe said nothing and stared at the walnut fascia of the dashboard. He wondered if Sunshine filed his teeth to points now, like a cannibal.

'I could finish you tonight,' Sunshine continued, 'and who'd worry, who'd come looking for you? Your ex? You want to know who she's shackled up with?' Sunshine left a silence. 'Your brother, that's who. They'd probably pay me to throw you off Vauxhall Bridge.'

Joe held onto his suitcase, waiting. This wasn't going to end easily. Ralph laughed in the back of the car and Joe felt his breath on the skin of his neck. The short hairs of his prison crop bristled at the touch of it.

'You killed my two kids,' Sunshine went on. 'Drove into 'em, drunk. My two kids. What do you think that did to my old woman? And all you got was five, out in three. I don't know how you're still breathing. Do you? I was going to slaughter you...plenty inside would have done it for me, you wouldn't have cost much, two hundred cigarettes at the most...but I was stopped...Ralph said you weren't worth doing time for...you can thank him that you weren't found hanged in your cell...but doing time wouldn't have stopped me, something else did.'

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Joe ran his tongue over his lips. He thought about saying he was sorry but then thought again. Sunshine wasn't in the 'sorry' league. Joe had been beaten up regularly inside and a different con had done it each time. Joe knew why; Sunshine was why. The prisoners liked doing favours for Sunshine, they'd drawn lots for it, it was enjoyable therapy, never mind water-colours or pottery. Joe had taken the beatings without complaint, there would have been no point. He had looked on it as part of his sentence. Knowing that he could be killed any day was also part of that sentence. He opened his mouth to speak, to say that he knew.

'Don't you say a word,' said Sunshine, 'you say anything and I'll change my mind, I haven't given up the idea, even now.' There was another silence. 'Here's what you do, Joe Rapps, you get out of London, right out. I don't care where you go, retire, do good works, but if I so much as smell you in the Smoke I'll give you to Cold Ronnie to play with, cut you up nice and slow, he would, you know how much he enjoys it...just get out of London, don't ever come back, not even to be cremated.'

Ralph laughed again, got out onto the pavement, opened Joe's door and pulled him out.

'On yer way, Rapps,' he said, and he slid into the seat Joe had vacated. The car started and drove gently away. Joe watched the rear lights disappear, then crossed the pavement and sat on the low coping that bordered the nearest house. The sweat trickled from his armpits. A comforting trickle, it meant he was still alive. He thought of what Sunshine might have done and shivered. It was like him to let Joe serve his time, making it as near torture as possible, but it would also have been in character for him to have handed Joe over to Cold Ronnie and watch him die. Cold Ronnie, from what Joe had heard on the grapevine, made Torquemada look like a Swiss doctor practising philanthropic euthanasia. Joe had seen Cold Ronnie once, just the once but that had been enough; as charming as a cobra and reliable too – reliable like a quicksand is reliable.

Joe could smell the laurels in the garden behind him. Laurels meant funerals. It was spring, beginning of May, and nearly

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midnight, and the glow of London was reflected on the low curve of the sky, killing the light that fell from the stars. He hadn't had many visits over the three years. He'd worn his friends out, they'd gone. They'd found him too louche, too much like hard work. A few film people he'd worked with had come to see him, at the beginning that was, but they had drifted away. What did they want with a drunken director-cameraman who had killed two innocent people in a car crash? Someone who'd hit the bottle hard waiting for his trial, and even harder during the trial.

He hadn't looked good in court: grey skinned, his eyes loose in red sockets. Geraldine had come to Wandsworth once, to tell him about the divorce. Then no one. And inside – hell. And no transfer to an open prison. Sunshine must have seen to that. Even the screws knew what the score was and he got all the dirty jobs: how many lavatories had he cleaned, how many hospital bed-pans emptied?

He got to his feet. At least one decision had been made for him. Wherever he chose to go there was no staying in London. But did Sunshine consider that Kingston was London. He had to go to the hostel, to begin with at least. He'd never had a life of stillness, of permanence, you don't get a lot of that in the film business, but London was what he knew; he was Battersea born and bred. Now it was out of the question.

He'd been on location all over the world, but his only real hope of getting a job lay in the capital, though who would employ him now? The film business was a slippery mistress; any time out of it and no one remembered your face, let alone your name. And Joe knew he was rusty. Techniques and equipment change over time. Where to go? He did have a cousin in Devon – bugger Devon! Australia then. Would the probation service permit such a thing? He'd need some money, real money, to get there and set himself up. Money! He had none, just his earnings from the prison. Twenty quid.

Headlights approached up Magdalen Road. Joe thought about running, tightened the grip on his case, changed his mind. What was the point? If it was Sunshine then there was nowhere he could hide. Sunshine would find him whenever he

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wanted.

The car swerved across the road, the full beam of the headlights picking Joe out like a rabbit. He shielded his eyes. The car swerved again and came to a halt in the same bit of gutter that Sunshine had parked in. It was a huge car, a white stretch. The driver's door opened and a chauffeur emerged, rising from his seat with an easy movement that said that he was fit and his knees and arms strong. He was dressed in a crisp suit, dark and well cut. He nodded at Joe in a kind of a bow, opened the rear door and inclined his body again.

'Please,' he said. 'I am ordered to take you wherever you wish.'

Joe advanced in a kind of a shuffle, not really knowing what to think or what to do. Getting into strange vehicles was a dangerous game. He bent and peered into the back of the car and saw that there was someone peering back at him; a round red face, grey hair, long sideburns; a heavily built man, thick thighs too. The face beamed and a fat hand waved him forward.

'Ah, Mr Rapps,' said the man in a voice as fat as the hand and as round as the face. 'Allow us to take care of you for a while. We will drive you in any direction you wish to go. Please.' The man leant across the enormous width of the car and pulled a shelf down to reveal a row of bottles. 'I can offer you vodka, Scotch, a Margaux even. I have a little food also, please.'

Joe took a step nearer. The chauffeur held the door and waited patiently, his smile cold. Joe hesitated. The passenger's suit was black and where his shirt should have been there was a spread of mauve material, his collar was white and back to front. He was a churchman: a Bishop.

Joe remained motionless for a moment, then the smell of alcohol got to him as the bishop poured himself a whisky, and he stepped up and into the space of the car, dropped his case onto the floor and let his body collapse into the embrace of the white leather seat. It was as wide as a double divan.

The Bishop poured a Margaux for Joe and smiled again, a smile that could have lit the main runway at Heathrow Airport.

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'I know your tastes,' he said, 'or at least I've been told what they are.' He raised his glass. 'Mr Rapps, here's to you, and years of freedom.' Joe rolled the wine over his taste buds. It was his first drink in three years and it hit his stomach like a tsunami. The car moved forward, as silent as a cloud of gas. A screen came down between the passengers and the chauffeur.

'And where would you like to go, Mr Rapps?'

'I have to go to Kingston on Thames, to a hostel. The probation service has to know where I am, I have no option.'

The Bishop nodded. 'But you do Mr Rapps. I have had a word with the Probation Service. They have delivered you into my custody...if you wish it of course. Kingston is a little close to London.'

'I'm more than happy to avoid the hostel,' said Joe, 'I'm told it's only marginally better than prison.'

The Bishop flicked a switch and spoke to the chauffeur. 'Milton Magna it is, Gerard,' he said and flicked the switch again.

Joe leant back on the cushions and took another large mouthful of his drink; it was a superb claret. Maybe he hadn't seen too many old gangster films after all.

* * *

'What's Milton Magna?' asked Joe. 'Where is it?'

The Bishop nodded like he was giving a blessing. 'It's a village of some nine hundred people,' he said, 'this side of Oxford. Quiet and restful. It's a little corner of old England, a microcosm of it. There's a church, a village shop, a public house, The Bull...you'll meet the landlady, pretty racy I'm told. There are rustic houses, thatched cottages and a huge hotel, very expensive, they come out from London in helicopters, just for dinner, it's run by a Belgian, Monsieur Claude de Topinambour, expensive but very good, Michelin rosettes...people complain about the helicopters, there's quite a few every week.'

The Bishop leant forward and refilled Joe's glass. Joe looked through the one-way window; they were heading onto Western