

# Beard's Roman Women

A Novel

*Photographs by David Robinson*

## Chapter 1

In the rainy March of 196— he had, an hour or so before being driven to the airport, cast his remaining metal lire into the Trevi fountain, daring Rome to call him back again. Not that Rome had really called him on this occasion: a matter only, or at least that had been the intention, of a few days' stopover on the way home to London from Brunei, via Singapore. He considered that he detested Rome, meaning its bloody history, its cowardly citizens, its godless bishops who were also godless popes, its boastful baroque, its insipid cuisine, its sour wine. A venal city and a cruel city and a city of robbers. Here his wife Leonora had had her first liver collapse and had loosed black blood over the hotel bedroom. She had spent time in a Roman hospital and had had Roman blood pumped into her. A city of robbers, even at the most rarefied professional level.

She died in an English March. He should have known, those quiet years in London when he was earning their living as a writer of scripts for radio, television and cinema, what her trouble was. He had even written a television play in which one of the characters, a writer of scripts for radio, television and cinema, died of cirrhosis. From those years in Brunei on, when he had worked for Radio Brunei, it never seemed to him that either of them drank excessively. In the tropics, surely, you sweated all that gin out before it got anywhere near the liver. To the house in Hammersmith they had had, true, one dozen bottles of Gordon's delivered weekly, but they dispensed tropical hospitality even to the delivery man; they drank wine only with dinner and did not invariably take a liqueur after; they spent no more

than two hours a day in pubs. He had emerged undamaged from this; why not then she also?

He realized too late what should always have been self-evident: that a woman was a smaller vessel than a man, that no man had a right to expect a woman, however much a woman wished it, to be a real, meaning drink for drink, companion. Add to this something always vaguely known: that white women living in the tropics suffered more than men from vitamin B deficiency; you then had reason enough for the decay of her liver. But even after the next, more massive, portal haemorrhage, when the hepatologist said 'If she drinks again she will die,' neither of them had been disposed to utter, outside a context of fiction or literary history, the dread word the doctors themselves had not uttered. Cirrhosis was for his television character, Caradoc Williams, or for Dick Tarleton of the Queen's Men. It was not for him, hence how could it be for her? There were medical dictionaries on his reference shelf, and these would have given him, had he cared to look, a candid reading of the signs. 'If she drinks again she will die.' That too was something for a television play.

The signs? Dulling of the eyes and hair, drying and yellowing of the skin, wasting of the limbs, grotesque distension of the abdomen. No notable loss of appetite, no pain, no impairment of memory or of intelligence. No sexual needs, apparently, but for some years now they had kept to their separate bedrooms, extolling the beauties of companionate love. A companionate life, call it, she sitting with her library novel by the electric fan, he clacking away at a script on the cleared dining-table. He shopped, she cooked. At the beginning of the terminal phase she, if not he, drank little enough. It was not that she was taking note of the hepatologist's warning: she did not care for the taste of blood in her mouth. 'Like,' she said more than once, 'regurgitating beef extract.' So strong drink would bring on another haemorrhage, and that would be another nuisance, what with having to wear a hospital nightgown again, be forbidden to smoke, be fed with the blood of strangers.

So she drank Schweppes tonic water well zested with lemon peel, but later said to hell, put a gin in, a single not a double, one single gin

or so a day can do no harm. A glass of dry white wine can do no harm, nor a chilled lager, chilled things are good for the stomach. Then Time-Life held a great, somehow definitive, party in their building in Bruton Street, and to this even script-writers were invited, along with their wives. Of course, she had to go. She looked well, knocking back the generous rummings of gin, talking vigorously to Lady Snow and Lord Snowden and the Leader of the Opposition, her dulled hair masked by an expensive golden wig, her face restored by cunning cosmesis to its former beauty, her swollen body tented in an elegant gold-thread caftan. Three days later the final portal haemorrhage began. The doctor was slow in arriving. Saucepans and jugs could scarcely keep pace with the tides of black blood. The doctor came at last and was grave and urgent. She was rushed into a hospital in Ealing.

While she was there, first transfused, then incised, a message came to him from his agent, announcing that Warner Brothers in Burbank, California, were anxious for him to fly over there and discuss the writing of a script for a very big film.

'Mr Schaumwein. He says you've already met.'

'It must have been at that Time-Life party. A fat man?'

'A fat voice. It's a musical they have in mind. He had that thing you did for the BBC about Shelley and Byron and Frankenstein and so on specially screened.'

'A *musical*? About *that*?'

'Well, Byron and Shelley and Mary Shelley and that Swiss lake they all lived near that summer, whenever it was. When she wrote *Frankenstein* and the others just wrote poetry. Somebody has the idea of doing a sort of ballet dream sequence with Frankenstein in it.'

'Interesting, but I can't go now. Leonora's very ill.'

'Will she be ill for long, do you think? They're very anxious to start talking about it.'

'They've pumped blood in and they've cut something out, the spleen I think, and she just lies there, yellow and comatose.'

'I see. Well, I'll let them know the position. Do you know anything about musicals? *Their* musicals?'

'I saw that thing they did based on *Playboy of the Western World*. With the dream leprechaun ballet sequence. Too much whimsy, I thought.'

'Percy's on at their theatre in Leicester Square. Go and see that if you can.'

'Percy? Who's Percy?'

'*Percy*. The title. About the boy looking for the Holy Grail. And the man who fishes all day and the man with the garden that's really a sort of brothel.'

'I'll try. Look, I'm really interested, tell them, but I do have this problem. Parsifal is the name, really. Let them know what the position is, will you?'

'I'll try.'

Two afternoons later Leonora seemed somewhat better. They had feared brain damage, but she was reading the *Daily Mirror* when he went up to her bed, and she said: 'This boy of five raped.'

'You seem better, dear.' But the yellowness was astonishing. A gaggle of Chinese nurses came in, on a visit from Singapore, and they quacked astonishment at the yellowness. They were in the charge of one of the resident sisters. He shooed them away. 'I don't consider this to be really decent,' he said.

'What you consider is neither here nor there,' said the sister. But then Leonora, in Kuo-Yü with very accurate intonation, told them to bugger off. She seemed better. He told her about Warner Brothers. She showed languid interest.

'So I thought I'd go and see this film tonight. Have dinner out somewhere first. I miss your cooking.'

'I'd like dinner too. But they just drip this glucose into me. And I'm so tired.'

'That's the effort of speaking Chinese perhaps. Anyway, I'll telephone when I get back from the cinema.'

'I'm so tired all the time.'

The film was not good. The Fisher King had a song about fishing and wishing, and Percy, a blond rather silly youth, had something *alla marcia* in which he announced that he would not fail to find the trail that led to the Holy Grail, and there was sticky love-stuff for

Klingsor's magic garden. Still, he could see what they might probably want for their film on the lovers of the lake (not a bad title, that), and he mused on it, as also on how long it would be before Leonora was better, over three double gins in a noisy Leicester Square pub. Back home in Hammersmith he telephoned the hospital. There was no change, they said: she was sleeping comfortably. He went to bed.

At two-thirty-five, blackness and noisy rain, the bedside telephone rang. It pierced a seemingly pointless dream about Rome in the rain (Grail, Waste Land, pope, redemption?).

'Mr Beard?' A man's voice, Ceylonese, Dr Lalkaka or something. 'Speaking.'

'Mrs Beard is— You had better come over.'

'She's—?'

'You had better come over immediately.' While he dressed, a vapid song started up in his brain, about Rome in the rain, I'll never see you again, You brought me sorrow and pain, Rome in the Rome in the rain. That was stupid. Rome could not be blamed all that much. She had collapsed, true, on the wet cobbles somewhere near the Isola Tiberina, and people had said *ubriaca ubriaca*, meaning drunk. Unsympathetic and unhelpful bastards, not even willing to help to lift her to her feet or call a taxi. But it could have been like that anywhere. He was trying to call a taxi now, or a minicab, anything, but it seemed hopeless. It was after five, the first day of spring as he noted from the Snoopy calendar behind the little living-room bar from which he was doing the telephoning, an anniversary easy to remember, meet for a Victorian poem, why did she die with the daffodils, but also black wet night and no taxis anywhere. Stay: there was one radio-cab delivering a fare to Hounslow; that would come for him; about forty minutes; what was the address again? My wife's dying. Sorry about that, guv, but we're doing our best, console yourself by reflecting that nobody can't do nothing about it, don't blame yourself if you don't get there in time.

He shaved with his battery-razor, prowling the long room. On the dining-table just by the kitchen door lay the Olivetti Lettera 32, folio 45 of a script in it, something for television, the mouth of the speaker frozen open in midspeech. Compassionately, he clacked the

speech to its end and shut the mouth. 'The whole bloody world turned into a dungy farmyard, clucking politicians that lay no eggs, a donkey braying from a field like a threat of recession.' Shit. The taxi was throbbing outside.

In the taxi he rehearsed lines. Let go, let go, darling, death's nothing to fear, here he is, he's gentle enough, a smooth driver to wherever you're going, go with him smiling. Ronald Beard as inept psychopomp. But when he got to her she was beyond seeming to swallow, in the final gasps for air he had envisaged, such sub-Huxleyan treacle. They had moved her from her middle place in the long ward to a private room at the end of it. She glowed with an old-guinea patina in the dim light, a few shallow breaths from the end. He waited about three minutes to confirm that he was now Ronald Beard the widower.

Next morning he would have to come back to collect her rings and see about the death certificate. Meanwhile he was to go home again in the rain and wait for the dawn and a reasonable hour to start telephoning relatives and friends. I fear (enjoying it really) I've some bad news for you. The taxi had a radio that played pop-music. Beard didn't really mind, but new widowerhood conferred certain rights worth taking just because they were rights. When a pop-group called the Grateful Dead was announced he asserted his rights. The driver was grumpy, having his rights too, but he yielded.

A week later the cremation took place at Mortlake. He had meanwhile stripped the house of most of the things she had worn and taken them to a local voluntary organization that distributed such needments to the poor. Not all that poor, really, however poor they were, since they were still alive. He began to understand too about ghosts now, for he heard her cough come from the bathroom and saw her, for half a second, sitting in her accustomed chair. He was lonely as hell, despite knocks on the door from women he did not know but who assured him that they were neighbours – widows and divorcees and two women who said they hated their husbands, all asking, leering sympathetically the while, if they could be of any help. The cremation was the regular sort of cremation regularly ignited by the local funeral directors, with 'The God of Love My Shepherd





Is' on tape and a few brisk words from the resident non-sectarian clergyman on the laughably self-evident truth of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Then relatives and friends went away with relics of the deceased – a beaver coat, a pair of calfskin boots, gold and silver, a just-started bottle of High and Dry. He was lonely as hell again.

He was also fifty. They had been married for twenty-six years. He had got out of the habit of sex. Ready enough for infidelity for his health's sake, he had feared that the time for being unfaithful might also be the time for her to give out blood again and him to start living forever in guilt. There was also the question of cooking. She had cooked well in the plain Welsh fashion, but here he was cracking hard-boiled eggs over the kitchen sink. The *Bon Vivreur* page in the *Daily Telegraph* showed him how to cook veal in Marsala and, since the Marsala was open and not all used up, a *zabaglione* for afters. Eating, he remembered that Leonora and he had eaten this very same meal, though with artichokes added, just before her collapse in rainy Rome, and that she had irritated him by pronouncing *zabaglione* with a hard g.

'That's wrong,' he said. 'An insult to the language.'

'Insult my arse. It's a question of who's to be master, mistress if you like, you or the language. Insult, indeed.'

'That's stupid, and you know it.'

'Would you like this *zabag*,' she said softly, '*lione* thrown in your fucking face?'

Always quick on the draw, Welsh blood. After lunch he played Schoenberg on the hi-fi. She had always hated Schoenberg. Turn that fucking noise off. Or, alternatively: You know I'm not well and that music gives me a headache. Have you no consideration at all? But now he could play *Moses and Aaron* as loud as he wished. No, he could not: there was admonitory banging on the neighbour wall. Rid yourself of one circumscription of liberty and there was always another waiting. A good phrase: he must try it out on Leonora. Ah, classical situation: there was a sonnet by Wordsworth on that theme: *Surprised by joy, impatient as the wind*. He dined on what he had lunched on, thus finishing the Marsala. He went to his local pub, the

Three Feathers, played darts, got more or less drunk. He was in bed at eleven-twenty, asleep at eleven-twenty-five.

At two-thirty-five, blackness and noisy rain, the bedside telephone rang. His luminous watch told him, as before, the time. He lay quite unable to move. The ringing continued. He could not answer it. It was all going to happen all over again: the two weeks since that other call had become a kind of film loop, and now his life was to be a living through of the same sequence, over and over, once he picked up that receiver. The ringing stopped at last, the minute hand moved on, he was probably safe. He switched on the lamp, lighted a Schimmelpenninck Duet, read what he had written of his new television play, his heart pounding but that may have been chiefly the drink, including the Marsala, did not much like what he had written. 'I've lived with you for ten years, and Christ alone knows how I've done it. Each time you make that little double grunting noise prefatory to some weighty borborygm I've heard a million times before I want to scream. I want to scream and scream and scream and—' The telephone rang again. Three-twelve. It would surely be all right this time. He lifted the receiver and found California frying away on the line. The hunters are up in America. A hard female voice, like frozen orange juice, asked him if he was Mr Beard. Mr Schaumwein for you, sir. Go ahead.

'You've had one hell of a time, Ron, we know, so we want you out here. Talk about the project. London office has been informed, Jack Mohammed there will make all arrangements. Start living again, boy, death is crap.'

'Did you ring before? About forty minutes ago?'

'Call before? Was he called before, Helen, about forty minutes? No, nobody called you before, Ron, not from this office, guess you must have been having, what the hell they call it, a pree money tory dream, you were asleep, right?'

'Thank you. Thank you very much. And I'll remember what you said. About death being a load of crap, I mean.'

'You do that.' And without valediction, the Hollywood manner as he was to learn, Beard was hung up on. The loop was snipped and spliced into the great reel of continuing life. That was too banal, he

reflected, even for a television play. That earlier call had evidently been a wrong number.

The plane from Heathrow to Los Angeles had one intermediate stop, this being at Chicago's O'Hare airport, where the entire crew changed. The new stewardesses in first class were dressed alluringly but bizarrely as micro-skirted beefeaters complete with ruff and royal monogram. Their pants, as he clearly saw when one called Janie leaned over to serve a martini to a window-seat, were patterned with the union jack. The airline was inaugurating, this very day, an in-flight fantasy series service called *The Best of Both Transworlds*, and it was beginning with a gastric parody of Great Britain – 'not,' said the silk-tasseled handout, 'the old stuffy pip-pip image but the new swinging Carnaby Street Tom Jones one.' Beard was served with strong Milwaukee ale in a plastic tankard which he could keep if he wished as a souvenir of Jollie Olde, and with what was called a pub lunch of mild shrimp curry with salad and thousand-island dressing. On succeeding flights, he read, there would be France ('Oo la la, you fly wiz to me to gay Paree, *n'est-ce pas*'), Italy ('you like-a munch-a da spaghett and hear-a da music of Joe Green, Giuseppe Verdi to you') and Manhattan Penthouse, which might or might not be more authentic. After lunch, one of the delectable beefeaters served him Beefeater gin and tonic all the way to Los Angeles, so that he was drunk when he entered the waiting studio car under the golden smog. Death was crap, right.

Ed Schaumwein said that again at the end of their tourist visit to Forest Lawn. This was intended to put Leonora's death in its proper perspective by demonstrating that death was also an aspect of life, or else life an aspect of death, something like that. Beard saw a sunset-glow blow-up of Leonardo da Vinci's 'Last Supper' and heard an oleaginous recorded commentary. He visited the cemetery store, which sold plastic statuettes of David and the Three Graces and little girls with their skirts blown up by the wind. He very nearly put down a deposit for his eventual inurnment in Poet's Corner. 'Don't be in too much of a hurry,' advised Ed Schaumwein. 'You have a real Poet's Corner back there in Westminster Church. You may make it there, boy, and nothing to pay.' Ed Schaumwein was

a formidable man like Genghis Khan and had, indeed, played that role along with many others before turning producer. He was also a hearty eater, and they had a hot pastrami sandwich at a place outside the cemetery gates called The Last Chance. The important thing for Ron, asserted Ed Schaumwein, was to start to live again, meaning work a little and get laid a lot.

'I'm afraid I've rather lost touch with that kind of thing.'

Ed Schaumwein showed chewed hot pastrami in disbelief. Beard explained it all, the avoidance of guilt, the superiority of marriage as complex semiotics to mere sex, hence hence hence – That was crap and he knew it. 'Crap and you know it,' Ed Schaumwein said. 'You're going to get laid.'

In Schaumwein's office at Warner Brothers in Burbank, more of a bar than an office, they discussed the film project unsystematically but creatively, meaning drunkenly. Sometimes the Head of Scripts was there, a fierce sober man who talked much about Motivation, and sometimes George Roy Hill, a rising young director who had studied music under Hindemith and written a thesis on *Finnegans Wake*. The project had had its beginnings at a Hollywood party at which Paul Newman or someone similar had said he'd like to play Lord Byron, great handsome limping lecher or layer, also poet, and had then gone into a claudicant exophthalmic routine which Joanne Woodward said was worthier of Frankenstein, meaning his monster. The laughter aroused by what seemed to all present, except one, the total improbability of this collocation was, or would have been at a soberer gathering, quenched by this one, a morose rewrite man, who told them all seriously that Byron had probably given serious rewrite advice to the authoress of *Frankenstein*, and then recounted to whomever would listen the whole story of that creative summer by the waters of Leman. So one thing had led to another, many a true word spoken in, and here they were, Ron and Ed, with the water sprinklers making rainbows on the lawns without and the smog all golden above, being creative.

When they were not being creative, there was drinking and dining at the Brown Derby, the Bistro, Chasen's, with dear Ed and Molly, Ed's wife, a charming strawberry blonde given, in a well-groomed

way, to Zen and astrology. There was also a quite nice girl, woman rather, who had once been Miss America, or it may have been several girls, serially, who had once been, in different years, Miss America. Dear Ed was still trying to get Beard laid, but Beard could not enter the situation cold, not just like that. Then there was a big party at Ed's bungalow mansion in Bel Air, and it was now that everything began to change and seeds of as yet unvoiced and unrealized doubt at the viability of phrases like *death is crap* started, silent and sparse and invisible and widespread, to be scattered. For now Paola emerged from the press of crown-teethed agents, directors, musical arrangers, actors and the rest. She was introduced to him as Paula Lucretia Belly, so that he did not first take her for Italian. If a man could have a name like Schaumwein, Belly was not impossible even for a slender girl like this. But she turned out to be Paola Lucrezia Belli, a surname meaning, Beard supposed, *of the family of beautiful ones*, appropriate enough for this member of it. That final vowel had to be well lifted. She spoke English well with British sounds but Mediterranean *bel canto*. She asked him first about his own name.

'To be called Beard and not to have a beard is strange or perhaps it is not strange. But it is a thing that must be remarked on often to you.'

'In the army mostly. *Living up to your name*, Beard was what they said on parade. But of course I always shaved very carefully, knowing it would be said. The fact is that I do have rather a heavy beard. I have to shave twice a day. But I've never grown a real beard, no. That would be wrong somehow, I think.'

She listened to all this with polite care. She said then: 'I first met your name in the Pasquino cinema in Rome. In Trastevere. They show films in English there. You had written the *sceneggiatura* for a film I saw that I liked. An Anglo-French-German film. With an Italian director.'

'*The Doomsday Girl?*' Beard said. 'Oh, but they changed so much. He did, I mean, Ruffini. All directors want to write, but all they can do is rewrite. It didn't end at all the way I wrote it.'

'The bones of it were good,' she said, in the somewhat deep voice that seemed at first to assort ill with her small compact body,