

BLACK ART

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BLACK ART

by V. T. Davy

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For the women of World War II

on both sides

All sorts of weird and fanciful stories are bound to be woven around this period, not least by those who were fortunate enough not to have been brought into contact with the Occupying Force.

Leslie Sinel

September 1946

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1.

The usually lively public house on the corner was quiet as I turned and flicked a hand at the driver of the Chevrolet. Death could have been driving that hearse and I wouldn't have known. Behind its smoked glass, the occupants were a blank. I crossed the road and the hearse revved impatiently at my heels - the only sound in an empty street.

Sloman had been unable to keep the girlish bubble of excitement out of his voice when he had telephoned. There is something about the prospect of appearing on television that makes the most sober of men go daffy. I could not have cared less, except that she would be there.

The outside lights of the hotel next door were turned on, ready for the influx of lonely conference attendees seeking drunken solace in a stranger's arms. Reflecting the hot pink sign and the twilight of the day's sun, the granite cobbles of Museum Yard glowed like the tops of a whore's well-corseted breasts after a steam bath. I lingered for a moment. I was in no hurry to get to my appointment.

The museum was a grey, concrete-rendered monument to some merchant's slaughter of cod off the North American Atlantic coast a long time ago. The house no longer had the stink of brine about it, but smelled of one hundred years of furniture polish, and well-bleached lavatories, and groups of children sucking fruit drops.

The sliding doors used by the visitors were locked for the night so I tried the old blue side-door, thickened by layers of gloss paint. I let it thud softly behind me.

The *gardien* must have heard the door; he appeared in the passageway before me. A champion weightlifter in his younger days, his shoulders and neck strained at the confines of his shirt collar, and his thighs filled the tops of his

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denim trousers. It was impossible to imagine him ever falling over. He said little and thought a lot.

'In his office.' He jabbed a thumb towards the stairs.

'Thanks, Gus.'

Angus nodded his sandy head as I put my hand on the insane brass flower that some Victorian had thought would suffice as a door handle on the great arch that kept the servants away from the family upstairs.

Cool indigo from the security lighting coloured the corridor outside the administration offices. A yellow gash cut through the blue, indicating Sloman's room was occupied and his door ajar.

Before I reached his office, I recognised her voice. Not as assured as in her films, softer and more feminine, but the round, smoke-edged tones that had seduced thousands, maybe millions, of men on screen, and a hundred off it, were unmistakeable for all that.

'I am tremendously excited to see what your detective can uncover, Mr. Sloman.'

She stopped as Sloman and the other man registered my presence in the doorway. For a moment, the only sound was the whirr of the fan on Sloman's desk.

'You're late,' growled Sloman.

Most likely he had been forced to make small talk to cover my absence.

'Work. Sorry.'

It was a lie. Not wanting to appear too eager, I had parked the car away from the museum and, listening to a man on the radio talk about blight in tomatoes, had killed the minutes until five past the hour, before strolling to the museum.

'Arty, this is Mr. King, and Miss Valentine, I'm sure you recognise.'

Sloman was being creepy.

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King extended a perfunctory hand and looked with undisguised disdain at me. He was a little man, in every sense of the word, who played the part of an obnoxious V.I.P. with ease. I suspected him of being a lightweight who desperately wanted to make costume dramas, but, disliked by management, was destined to make cheap one-trick television shows. He had a small pinched moustache and a way of standing that gave the impression he was homosexual. I've been wrong before and he could have just been around homosexuals too long. In his line of business, it was possible.

Helen Valentine stood and held out a strong hand with short unvarnished nails, manicured not bitten. She was all of the six foot two she was reputed to be. Her hand held mine briefly, but firmly. She smiled sweetly.

'Please call me Helen.'

Like great malt that has the underlying hint of oaken sherry barrel, her R.A.D.A.-smoothed voice had not quite lost its northern accent. I cursed my weakness for good elocution.

I think I said, 'I'm Arty. Arty's just fine.'

Helen's only concession to her forty-something years might possibly have been her hair colour, but this could equally have been chosen for the part she was next to play. This evening, she was blonde; a pale, lemon blonde, not quite platinum. She'd been a brunette streaked with grey in her last part. She looked younger in Sloman's office, an impression assisted by the fact that today she was not playing mother to some twenty year-olds, and that she was wearing one of those off-the-shoulder, Dior-cut dresses in pale grey silk. It was the kind of dress that husbands in the 1950s would have been proud to show off. I thought of the cobblestones outside.

'Arty is our senior genealogist. If anyone can find out what happened to your grandmother, Miss Valentine, Arty will.'

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'I hope that your senior genealogist won't pull too many skeletons out of my family closet, Mr. Sloman.'

If her remark was loaded, it was difficult to tell. She may have just been being charming.

'Well, I think we are done and you must be dying for something to eat. I have a prior engagement, but I took the liberty of booking a table for you.'

Sloman was being very creepy.

'If it is all the same to you, we'd prefer to go back to the hotel.'

King nodded at Helen, who smiled at Sloman. Sloman looked disappointed momentarily.

'Of course. I'm sorry. I'm sure you're tired from your flight. Arty will drive you back. I cannot leave you in a more capable pair of hands.'

He could. A chauffeur's would have been more capable, but that wasn't the point. I'd been promised dinner by Sloman when he'd telephoned and, instead, I'd got to use up a tank of petrol.

'We'll get something to eat there,' said King, stuffing his notepad into a leather satchel.

That was more like it. I was going to dine at the television company's expense with one of the most beautiful women in show business and some television producer with an inferiority complex. In my experience, there's always a price.

2.

They said nothing on the drive to the hotel. He sat in the back seat, staring out of the window, and she sat beside me. As she'd sat in the car, her skirt had ridden up a little to reveal the crook of her knee and, as I changed gear, I could

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see a patch of soft, pale skin made iridescent by the coloured lights of the bay. It was comforting to know she was just a girl, like any other.

Inside the hotel lobby, King looked at his watch and said, 'It's later than I thought. Helen, darling, if you'll excuse me, I have some telephone calls to make. Nowlan will have my balls for breakfast if I don't tell him about the change of plan. You know how he is. I'm sorry I can't eat with you.'

I wasn't sorry.

'Would you mind briefing the genealogist alone?'

He hadn't remembered my name. It wasn't important enough.

'Of course not. I'll see you tomorrow, Tony.'

King kissed his star on both cheeks.

'In the lobby at nine?'

She nodded and watched him walk to the reception desk. Turning, she said politely, 'Shall we see what the bar serves, or would you prefer the restaurant?'

The bar was badly lit and empty. The restaurant was bright and was serving a long table of salesmen or rugby players (they were all the same to me) who were there for the night.

'The bar.'

The bar was piping Dizzy Gillespie's 'Tin Tin Deo' at a low level over its sound system. It was too cool for the bland corporate decor, but it said something for the barman. With an effort, he pushed himself upright and took a step nearer. He thought he'd been rushed off his feet since he came on. Anyone looking at his invisible clientele knew otherwise. She ordered.

'Gin and tonic.'

A serious drink; it suited her perfectly: stylish, never out of fashion, unlike a cocktail, with a big slug of one of the unadulterated spirits.

'What will you have?' she asked.

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I steered away from ales and matched her with: 'Rye and dry.'

I let her charge it to her room.

The barman gave us his best sales patter: 'If you want food, the menu is on the table. We stop serving at nine-thirty.'

His pitch was hard to resist.

I could have eaten my own fist so I ordered something standard with chips.

She toyed with the menu then tossed it onto the table. She wasn't hungry.

She took a little of her drink then looked at me over the top of the ice.

'So, Arty Shaw. Was your father into jazz?'

She smiled briefly.

'No, Greeks.'

'Forgive me. You must get sick of being asked where your clarinet is.'

'It gets funnier every time.'

She laughed; a throaty laugh with the rhythm of a machine gun.

'Why genealogy?'

'I like the challenge.'

My answer was brief enough to be rude so I continued, 'Dead men can't talk.'

The only evidence you have is what they leave behind.'

'You prefer the dead to the living?'

'I didn't say that.'

'The certainty of the evidence must be attractive? Dead men don't lie either.'

'You'd be surprised.'

She was probing, finding out what made me tick. I wasn't comfortable with her assumption that, because you work with the past, you are running from the present. It was a common enough cliché, but I reckoned she knew better than that.

'Why are you doing Roots?'

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She took a sip of her drink and laughed; a short sarcastic laugh this time.

'You want to know what a serious actress like me is doing on celebrity T.V.'

I did, but I wasn't about to feed her ego.

'What are you hoping to find out?'

'Nothing too scandalous, I hope.'

There it was again. It was disingenuous. She'd like nothing better than a scandalous ancestor.

'What would you consider a scandal, Miss Valentine?'

She was on the back foot. Her eyes flicked around the bar looking for inspiration. Then, she fixed me with those glaucous peepers of hers.

'That my grandmother had a passionate fling with Vita Sackville-West.'

It was about the best response she could have given. I retreated into history.

'Your grandmother would have been about thirty years her junior.'

She smiled; the kind of smile that plays before you declare a winning poker hand.

'Interesting. A lesbian affair is okay, but a thirty-year age gap is not.'

I opened my mouth to make a poor retort, but was saved by the barman hovering at my elbow with a plate of food.

Instead, I said, 'Does the star of the show usually tag along with the research team? Aren't you people too expensive?'

'They're not paying me. I had some time out and I thought it would be a good excuse to see where my mother grew up.'

'I see.'

I tossed back the remains of my whisky and considered how best to tackle the overfull platter in front of me without creating an uncouth spectacle in front of her.

'Tell me about your grandmother.'

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She picked up her glass and studied the bubbles in it. Resting it on the arm of the chair, she said, 'I never knew her.'

I took a mouthful of something that might have once walked round a farmyard. It was the consistency of carpet and had about as much flavour. As I gave the Axminster a workout in my mouth, I watched her, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

'My mother barely knew her. They're both dead now.'

I cut off another piece of Axminster. I couldn't say I was sorry. I didn't know them or how long ago it was that they choked.

'What's the connection with the Island?'

'My mother was born here – Irene, 'Reeny', Le Sueur.'

She said 'Le Swer' like an Islander, not 'Le Sewer' like the narrator of *Roots* was bound to do. Stupidly, I was impressed.

'And, her parents were both born here. My grandfather was Clarence Le Sueur. He was a civil aviation engineer. He was called up pretty swiftly after the war started. My mother always joked that she must have been the product of his last night at home before joining his squadron.'

She said it flatly, without any hint of humour. I didn't laugh. I had a feeling that her story wasn't going to end happily.

'He was killed during the Battle of Britain. He wasn't a pilot. He was on the ground and caught some crossfire from one of ours, or theirs, over the field.'

That was just plain bad luck.

'My grandmother was Katherine, 'Kay', Marett. She was born in 1919, she married my grandfather in 1939 and that's almost all I know. She didn't survive the war either. Everyone said she was very good looking.'

Everyone always does. There's no such thing as an ugly corpse.

She produced a photograph with frayed edges and a bad crease across one

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corner and held it towards me. It was a beige headshot; all soft focus and hard spotlights. The kind they used to take in Hollywood in the Thirties and that neighbourhood studios copied to give their clients' Depression-filled lives a little glamour.

Surprisingly, everyone was right: Kay Maret was good looking. Not pretty, but with the kind of strong definition and classical proportions that would have grown old gracefully. She was slightly in profile, her chin up, staring candidly at something to her right in the middle distance. I handed the picture back to its owner. There was no denying that the woman in the photograph was Helen's grandmother.

'We know she gave birth to my mother on 27 June 1940 and she was still in the hospital when the Germans marched in.'

'Not an easy day to forget.'

'No.'

I nearly said, 'The Germans wore grey, your grandmother wore blue.' I settled for a forkful of warm coleslaw instead.

'In 1942, my grandmother disappeared. In the middle of the night, she left her two year-old daughter and just disappeared. Can you imagine that?'

I couldn't imagine leaving a child. Not because it was unthinkable, but because I couldn't imagine having a child to leave.

'Perhaps she was out after curfew and was bumped off? Or she was caught painting V-signs by the Germans? Who knows? Maybe, it was a delayed reaction to my grandfather's death and she walked into the sea? Whatever happened that night, the television company want to know. That's where you come in.'

I noted that it was the television company who wanted to know, not her. Like hell, she didn't. I didn't feel like letting her down gently. Her grandmother's story wasn't as exciting as she imagined. I put down my fork.

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'You want to know what happened? She was deported, along with a thousand others whose faces the Germans didn't like.'

It was nothing to get excited about. On this Island, if you didn't know someone who knew someone whose relatives were deported, it was extraordinary.

'Hitler was sore about something around that time and he decided to take it out on the Islands so, if you weren't born here, you were rounded up and shipped off to Biberach or Laufen. Once the deportation trail had been established, the German authorities used it whenever they needed it. That should give the production company enough material.'

She seemed pleased at that. Her grandmother's story was the sort of thing that was made for family viewing; lots of anecdotes about the indomitable British spirit behind barbed wire, with none of the horrors of the concentration camp.

'What about your father's side?'

'He's still alive and living in Yorkshire. They're Yorkshire cobblers all the way back. It doesn't make for interesting television. He met my mother in the late Fifties when he came here on holiday.'

'A lot of people did.'

'His name's Walter Clack.'

I smiled. I couldn't help it. No wonder she had changed her name to Helen Valentine. She got the joke and smiled too. I liked that about her.

3.

A quiet, rural island of growers and dairy producers; a haven for walkers, cyclists, and families wanting a seaside break from the U.K. mainland to somewhere just close enough to France to be exotic; a place where neighbour

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knew neighbour, where men did what they were told by women at home, and women did what they were told by men in public; the Island was an emerald isle set in an azure sea. And, that was how the Germans found it in 1940 when they strafed the potato lorries lined up along the harbour, mistaking them for a military convoy. Daft sons-of-bitches.

Apart from pouring tons of concrete around the Island's coast to prevent the erosion of its shoreline by the massive tidal reach that raced in its waters, the German occupation had little permanent impact on the Island. It wasn't until the late Sixties, early Seventies, when the Island was invaded by suits from London that life began to change. The money men, seeing a tax loophole, exploited it for their own ends and those of their well-heeled clients. They built homes and swimming pools and office blocks, and bought expensive cars, and increased the population so the Island entered the world's top ten of most densely packed humans. And ruined the pastoral idyll.

They also paid the Island's taxes, which bought the Islanders a better health service, above average schools, well-maintained roads, Bobbies on the beat, and jobs in the growing civil service. They spent money in the restaurants, and with the builders and plumbers, and in the fashion houses, jewellers, and perfumeries. They brought with them their middle class philanthropy that held coffee mornings, and started professional men's service clubs, and raised money for the Island's less fortunate. But this did nothing to endear them to the local who jealously guarded his patchwork of small, uneconomic, enclosed fields and his failing tourist industry, unable to compete with package holidays to guaranteed sunshine.

The friction between local and incomer flawed the emerald isle set in a sea that was only ever azure on a blistering summer's day. I didn't care about the war of words that erupted every time elections to the Island's government came

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around. I was a historian, and, however much the Islander wanted to believe that he stood alone, governor of his own destiny, untouched by events beyond his shore, just like everywhere else, the Island was its history and the history of the world. Blame the most recent wave of incomers for the Island's problems and you're missing the point that centuries of change, large and small, much of it outside the Island's control, had led to the development of the Island's current incarnation. How far do you want to go back to find the cause? To the U.K. taxation rates of the 1970s that saw the nation's highest earners taxed at seventy-five per cent? To the crumbling of the British Empire in the 1940s that meant colonials needed somewhere safe to move their money? To the Victorian passion for the British seaside and the publicity that created the Island's image as a sunny, unspoilt haven? To the Interregnum where the Island remained loyal to the crown and won itself a large helping of gratitude and latitude in return? To the Battle of Hastings, where the Island, part of William's duchy, took the English throne and, when Normandy went back to the French under King John, the Island, deciding it didn't like the smell of garlic and onions, became a peculiar of the English crown, or, in other words, a law unto itself? Pick the bones out of a thousand years of history and find your own personal scapegoat.

I didn't need to. I wasn't an Islander. You couldn't be unless all four of your grandparents had been born in the Island. I had reason to be grateful to the finance industry that, through its taxes and benison, supported the Island's arts and heritage organisations. Without their patronage, I'd be out of a job. But it wasn't the immigrant population who came calling at the archive, seeking their family's history. It was the Islander who wanted to know and, without their patronage, I'd be out of a job. The Island had been good to me.

The morning was oppressive, and sultry, and grey. I had spent it in the archive's temperature-controlled vault. My fellow archivists had had the same

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idea. When it got so you couldn't walk down a row of shelves without saying, 'Excuse me', I returned to my office and turned the fan on. All that did was blow warm air on the back of my neck. Had Helen Valentine wanted to blow warm air on the back of neck, I wouldn't have said no.

By midday, a small breeze had stirred itself and the sun was beginning make some headway in the white sky. The rock face outside my office window was turning from a threatening rust to the salmon-rose of the desert. In half an hour, it would be twinkling like the Southern Cross.

As it turned out, I had been hasty in my assessment of Helen's story. Her grandmother's disappearance did not appear to be a simple case of deportation. I had found Kay Le Sueur's registration card quickly. I was also fortunate in turning up an original identity card, dated January 1941, with the incongruous word 'Inhaber' alongside her name. She must have left it behind when she disappeared. I guessed that Irene gifted it to the archive after the war.

The card confirmed Helen's story that her grandmother was 'Geboren am' 18 July 1919 in the Island, she was 'Verwitwet' having lost her husband to the Luftwaffe's fire the previous autumn, her 'Farbe des Haares' was given as fair and her 'Farbe der Augen' were grey. She was 'Wohnhaft' at St Saviour's Gardens, St Saviour.

There was something chilling about those efficient little pieces of worn beige card. They represented a population deprived of liberty and every black and white photograph told the same story of pride under duress. Kay's picture was no different. The flat, head and shoulders portrait was of an unremarkable young housewife. Her jaw was tightly set and the corners of her mouth looked strained. Those grey eyes, that had been open and smiling, now showed signs of defiance. Or, maybe they didn't and maybe it was just the romantic in me. Maybe she was tired from having baby Irene in the house.

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I wasn't getting very far with my research, so I took a stroll to the Lord Nelson for an American beer and a sandwich that had been soft and appetising once upon a time.

When I returned, a frazzled girl with a hands-free earpiece, who looked about sixteen, was talking fast at the archive's *gardien*, a gentle, fleece-wearing man who, if you told him there was a car bomb parked outside, would calmly ask his god for strength and then evacuate the building. A crisis had arisen over Helen Valentine's time of arrival at the archive. The morning's personal appearance had taken longer than anticipated and the sixteen year-old, who turned out to be a research assistant, was in the process of changing the schedule for the afternoon. The *gardien* blinked at her and her crisis from behind his small, round glasses.

I skirted the action and headed back to my office. It took just ten minutes for the sixteen year-old to find me. She was Anne-Marie and she was keen to know how my research was going. I cheered myself up by telling her that my research was going nowhere. She seemed less keen at that. I think it made her day just perfect.

'What am I going to do? Nowlan won't like this. We're over budget for this series as it is. Ms. Valentine cannot get here for another half an hour; nobody on this Island has a clue where we could hire a Marshall seven inch; the hotel's double booked the room we're supposed to use for Ms. Valentine's interview tomorrow; if we get through today's recce of the locations before we lose the light it'll be a miracle...'

She could have added that thousands are facing starvation in Africa, the polar ice cap is melting, the Baiji dolphin may already be extinct, and the Western economic model is unsustainable, but she had run out of crises in her world.

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I shrugged.

'You have to have found something. Perhaps, we could set up a rostrum camera and get some shots of the documents you've dug up?'

'Perhaps I could re-unite Kay Le Sueur's grand-daughter with her grandmother's ID card? We could shake hands for the folks at home to show there are no hard feelings.'

She looked me up and down. Paused and then said, 'No, no, I really don't think that will work.'

It was sweet of her to take me seriously. Sweet, but dumb. I decided to throw her a bone.

'OK. I can't find Kay Le Sueur in the main deportation lists of September and December 1942, and February 1943, but deportation is still the most likely explanation. Take a look at her mother's maiden name.'

I pushed a copy of Kay's parents' marriage certificate across the desk at her.

'Eleventh of May 1914. John Marett. Heidi Kohn.'

She looked at the certificate for a moment longer before it dawned on her.

'Kohn. That's a German name.'

'She was born in Berlin in 1896. Anything else?'

'They married just before the First World War started, which probably saved her from being interned. I don't know what happened on the Island during World War One.'

'Pretty much the same as what happened all over Europe. They lost a generation of young men in a pointless, muddy, bloodbath.'

'Yes,' she said earnestly.

She dug around for a pen in the uniform combat trousers of her profession and began to make notes from the certificate in a large hardback diary.

'They were both living in the East End at the time of their marriage... John

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Marett was a feed merchant and she was a seamstress... So, they weren't living here. They were living in England. The English would definitely have interned her. So, she must have been saved by her marriage,' she said brightly.

Not necessarily, but that was now the story that would be piped into a million living rooms: a young feed merchant called John Marett saved his fiancée from imprisonment by marrying her on the eve of the Great War. The fact that it took the newly-weds five years to produce their oldest child had escaped her. It could indicate a period of separation. Heidi's imprisonment was a possible reason.

I helped her out again. I don't know why I was so good to her. Perhaps, I just don't like to see dumb animals suffer.

'Kohn is a Jewish name. Helen's great-grandmother was a German Jew, which means Kay Marett was half-Jewish.'

I thought she'd jump at that one. Instead, she said flatly, 'We've done the Holocaust with Larry Michaels.'

Somewhere in the dust of Germany and Poland six million human beings were dispensed with, again.

'Can you find out more about Heidi Kohn's war? The public love a romance.'

I wondered if I was one of her public. I preferred my history from the original documents, not from the script department.

'We need background. Why was John in London? How might they have met? When did Heidi's parents emigrate from Germany? This is just the hook Tony wanted. How long do you need?'

Before I could answer, she pressed the thing in her ear madly and started pushing buttons on her mobile telephone with her thumb, gathering up her diary with the other hand.

She was on the wrong track. Heidi Kohn's war was not the story here.

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'Give me a couple of days,' I said to her retreating back.

END OF SAMPLE

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