



*Memoirs of a
Booklegger*

JACK KAHANE

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Founder of the Obelisk Press

MEMOIRS OF A BOOKLEGGER



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Jack Kahane was born Jonas Kahane in Manchester on July 20, 1887 to Jewish immigrants from Romania. He attended the Manchester Grammar School and then worked in the textile business until 1914, when he enlisted and served as an officer in the First World War. He was wounded near Ypres in 1916. Following a stay in a Boulogne hospital he married Marcelle Girodias, a wealthy Frenchwoman he had met earlier. After the Armistice he set up as a coal merchant in Paris, but in 1921 poor health forced him to withdraw to a sanatorium. During his convalescence he wrote his first novel, *Laugh and Grow Rich*, which enjoyed a modest success – partly because it was banned by the British circulating libraries.

He continued writing for several years but eventually “grew tired of writing novels of negligible value for publishers with negligible assets”. In 1931 he founded his own company, the Obelisk Press, where he published his books (under the pen name *Cecil Barr*), as well as other writers, including Richard Aldington, Cyril Connolly, Lawrence Durrell, James Joyce, Henry Miller, and Anaïs Nin. Since the local authorities were primarily interested in French language works, Obelisk was able to publish novels that would have been censored, or banned entirely, in an English-speaking country. Connolly described Kahane’s venture as a “lonely guerilla war against prudery”.

Kahane died on September 3, 1939, shortly after finishing this autobiography and on the same day that France and the United Kingdom declared war on Germany. It has been suggested that Kahane was working for the British Foreign Office at the time and was assassinated for espionage.^{1,2}

Kahane’s son Maurice took his mother’s name to avoid persecution during the German occupation of France. After the war, Girodias relaunched his father’s publishing business, and then went on to found his own Olympia Press.

Readers who wish to know more about Kahane and the Obelisk Press are directed to Neil Pearson’s book *Obelisk: A History of Jack Kahane and the Obelisk Press*, published by the Liverpool University Press in 2007.

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¹Martha Cornog, *Libraries, Erotica, and Pornography*, p. 56

²Karl Orend, “The Observations Gathered Concerning His Morality and Probity Are Favorable” *Nexus: The International Henry Miller Journal*, Vol. 4, p. 187

TO MY BROTHER

F.E.K.

BEST OF BLOKES

Chapter One

WE were drinking coffees together, Brighthouse and I, in one of those dark underground dens for which Manchester in those days was justly famous. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, we were both in the cotton trade, and the hour had struck (as it did at the same time every morning) to discuss ways and means of getting out of it.

Both of us had been born into cotton. Brig was in his father's business, but my father had died when I was six and his business soon after him, so I had to find a job when I left school. We were both Manchester Grammar School boys and saw no reason to be ashamed of it. I had not known Brig at school. He was a few years older and on the modern side. By the time I had reached the Classical Transitus, next to the top, my interest in education had evaporated, and the cotton trade looked like heaven.

How to get out of it? Brig had definite ideas. I hadn't. He was going to be a playwright (it would have been affected to say dramatist): he was one already. I don't know how many plays he had written. All his holidays he spent in London, and went to a play every evening and to every matinée. When he got home from the office he wrote hard into the night. He wrote, thought, lived, dreamed, saw plays. He was unique – at least I thought he was until I met Stanley Houghton. Another playwright....

But how to get out of cotton? We sipped our coffee, and felt a little scornful. I had written a play or two myself, infected by the prevalent ardour, but my heart wasn't in it. I couldn't see myself a professional playwright. Whereas Brighthouse (and Houghton) saw nothing else. "But playwriting,

where does it lead?" I complained. "Look at all you've written, and you're still here, getting old selling cotton."

Brig sucked at his pipe. I don't know that he appreciated the allusion to age. And I think he had the essential realism to argue that twenty-four wasn't really old.

"Well, Jack," he said, his eyes glinting, "as far as I am concerned, the theatre's the only way out of here, and you must do as you like." He jerked up his head, looking more like a neurotic bulldog than ever. I didn't feel happy about it. London was the Mecca, of course; we may have been decidedly not snobs about being Manchester men, but that didn't mean that we wanted to go on living there.

"Well, I don't think playwriting's the way," I persisted.

Brig looked at me scornfully. "Then what's your way?" Alas, I didn't know. I remained silent, and sucked at my pipe. One couldn't have literary leanings and not smoke a pipe. *Je grillais quelques cigarettes*. You recognize it? Balzac, Eugène de Rastignac, Lucien de Rubempré. *Les Illusions Perdues*. I had read the whole *Comédie Humaine*, from the beginning to end, the whole forty volumes of them, in French, and my entire outlook had been shattered and reformed.

Of course I didn't realize it then, while I was drinking coffee with Brighthouse, but one of the many major tragedies of my life was that I was a romantic born in an age of realists.

"There is a way," I said at last, firmly. Not for me the petty *vie de province*, even if I hadn't the playwright's sacred fire. "I'll bet you, Brig, I'll bet you that" – "What? In the name of God what?" How was I to prove beyond all words of doubt my defiance? Inspiration came. "I'll bet you I'm mentioned in a *Manchester Guardian* leader before you," I gasped. Brighthouse stared at me, eyes bulging out, jaws sagging. He left off smoking his pipe. I met his gaze firmly, my head high. Blasphemy I might have uttered, but I didn't retreat. I mentioned the stake, the amount of which I have forgotten. "Is it a bet?" I asked. He nodded and then: "Pshaw!" he uttered, practically as spelt. "Come on, let's pay for this coffee, I have to get back to WORK."

Pretty proud of myself I strode away in my direction; six feet tall and about three inches thick. I passed a girl, hur-

rying along. She had liquid brown eyes as I could perceive because they were full on me for a moment, softly and amiably. I blushed and strode on. "Pshaw !" I said to myself, exactly as spelt. "A little soubrette. Somebody's plaything for an hour." But of course, I looked higher. *La Femme de trente ans* was my mark.

My life until then had been an up and down affair with the downs in a large majority. My family seemed to be in a state of chronic impecuniosity, and poverty comes the harder when one has known another state. Moreover, few people can adapt themselves to poverty who have not been born to it. My family was no exception, and probably made the worst of such resources as they still possessed.

My mother having died when I was eight (my father had preceded her by two years), I was brought up by a sister more than twenty years older than myself (I was the penultimate of a large family). I adored her. Unfortunately, from my point of view, she had two boys of her own, one a year younger than myself, the other a baby. It was on my elder nephew's account that I was so glad to leave school. I had a very average brain and as luck would have it his was one of the best of his generation. A first-class mind, bad cess to him. So I left school when I was nearing seventeen, and he went to Oxford – Balliol, where he got the Craven, the Ireland, the Gaisford Greek verse, and most else – and out of my life for ever.

And I went to business. I got a job in a shipping office which had advertised in the *Manchester Guardian* for a gentleman's son. As I got the job I must have been a gentleman's son. And the catch was that whereas ordinary men's sons were paid five shillings a week, gentlemen's sons were paid four shillings and prospects.

We were a perfectly new firm. The furniture was new and burnished, and brightly reflected the big cheerful fire. There were two partners, one of whom was a gentleman, the other of whom advertised for gentlemen's sons. We were engaged in the export of cotton goods to Shanghai, China, where we had "our own" branch. At first I took it very seriously, and worked hard. On three evenings a week I went to the technological branch of the Victoria University of Manchester,

which was a high-sounding institution. I learned weaving, or rather didn't, as the simplest machine is beyond my build of mind to understand. I got a diploma for weaving without knowing at which end of the machine to put the shuttle, and then dismissed the matter from my mind.

As we were dealing with China I thought a logical thing to do would be to learn Chinese. For three years I applied myself to that amalgam of picture making and vocal acrobatics, and did better at it than at the weaving machines. I was first in Chinese from beginning to end, and enjoyed every moment of that experience. The professor was E. H. Parker, who had been British consul in various parts of China for countless years. He was a fascinating man to me, very gruff and eccentric, and I think he took rather a fancy to me. Perhaps that was why I was always first. He had been in command of the defence of Canton during the Boxer rebellion, for which he had received written thanks from the German Emperor, the Tsar and other monarchs. These he showed me one day, not without a certain shy pride, but I don't think he was really interested in them. He was deeply devoted to the language and literature and had written some excellent works on the subjects. I wonder why nobody has thought to reprint them at this time when China is such tragic news.

He lived in Liverpool – he was also a Reader in Chinese at the University – with his daughter Mary and two huge dogs who always dined at the same table. Other pupils were Sir Tom Ainscough who has made good, but in India, and Norman Melland, brother-in-law of Asquith, the Prime Minister, by his first wife, Helen. Norman Melland joined the class late and I was told off to bring him up to date. It was purely honorific, and I only remember it because it was in Melland's house I first smoked a supremely good cigar, my pay.

After about three years of drudgery, I found out that the moment had come to choose which of the young gentlemen should be sent to the Shanghai branch. There were only two of us in it: a boy called Rupert whose father was a neighbour of one of the partners, and who, although a good sport, was one of the most wooden-headed citizens that I have ever

met. But his uncle was a professor of music and a prominent member of the bowling and social club to which the senior partner belonged; so Rupert had the advantage of birth and my weaving diploma and my considerable knowledge of Chinese went for nothing.

My only consolation was that in less than a year he was shipped back as hopelessly incompetent, both socially and mentally. I was delighted. I had come to loathe the senior partner, who was anyhow a scented and over-polished Cockney, and whose choice had been the cause of so much expense and humiliation.

I was fobbed off with the secretaryship of a tiny subsidiary company which had been in financial difficulties and had been taken over. But I was no longer interested in business. I dropped Chinese and began to be more interested in playwriting, and similar pursuits. Business, such as it was, had become a mere contemptible means to an end. I wasn't sure what the end was, but that didn't matter.

Velvet was the particular product my firm produced; a more important branch of the cotton industry than might be imagined. There is quite a "romance" of velvet, or there was as far as I was concerned. The surface of the cotton consists of invisible loops across the whole width of the cloth which are cut by a knife, the two halves of each loop, infinitely repeated, being the pile. The cutting operation is an industry of its own. It was still being done by hand, and was controlled by a group of men banded together into an association of incomparable toughness. The member of it with whom my firm was in touch, Roger Meanock, was the toughest of all. Today when I hear of tough Americans I think of Roger and smile. "What's mine's my own," said Roger, "and I please myself how I spend it."

One day, a friend, Price-Heywood, said he could get me a better job. A big merchant he knew wanted to start a velvet department. We met. He was a gigantic German, with a yellow hat and a flower in his buttonhole, and bunions. I had recently mastered the art of conversation, so I quietly listened to him while he talked himself into giving me the