

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

UNITED NATIONS ISSUE

EUROPE

	<i>from England</i>		
IN DEATH THEY WERE DIVIDED		F. Tennyson Jesse	4
	<i>from Belgium</i>		
THE CHATEAU OF MISSING MEN		Georges Simenon	12
	<i>from Hungary</i>		
THE BEST POLICY		Ferenc Molnár	18
	<i>from Portugal</i>		
THE MAUL, THE SWORD, AND THE SHARP ARROW		Victor Palla	21
	<i>from Russia</i>		
THE MALEFACTOR		Anton Chekhov	38
	<i>from France</i>		
THE DEBT COLLECTOR		Maurice Level	42
	<i>from Czechoslovakia</i>		
THE COUPON:		Karel Čapek	47
	<i>from Italy</i>		
SORCERY		Gabriele D'Annunzio	54

AUSTRALIA

	<i>from New South Wales</i>		
THE POWER OF THE LEAF		A. E. Martin	65

ASIA

	<i>from the Philippines</i>		
FOURTH RULE FOR MURDERERS		H. T. Alfon	81

AFRICA

	<i>from the Union of South Africa</i>		
BEING A MURDERER MYSELF		Arthur Williams	89

SOUTH AMERICA

	<i>from Argentina</i>		
THE GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS		Jorge Luis Borges	101

NORTH AMERICA

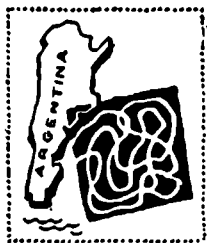
	<i>from Canada</i>		
KILLER IN KHAKI		Edgar D. Smith	111
	<i>from the United States</i>		
THE NIGHT REVEALS		Cornell Woolrich	121

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PRIZE WINNER FROM ARGENTINA: JORGE LUIS BORGES



We have long believed that Anthony Boucher possesses the three major qualifications of a topnotch translator: he is himself a creative writer; he is unquestionably a creative critic; and last but not least, he has that type of rabid enthusiasm which can only be described as passionate. As a result, Mr. Boucher's translations of foreign detective stories project an undeniable authenticity. The author's original style, always so difficult to capture in alien words, comes through: we get the substance of the plot and the shadow of the mood and characterization . . . It was Mr. Boucher who conceived the idea of translating "The Garden of Forking Paths" and persuading the author to submit the story to EQMM's Third Annual Contest. We are grateful for Mr. Boucher's double services as a mystery-midwife — otherwise none of us would have had the pleasure of reading what Mr. Boucher considers "a small classic." In its own rather peculiar way, "The Garden of Forking Paths" is just that — a miniature masterpiece. The story is based on a tremendous, a colossal coincidence. Indeed, as you will discover, the coincidence is so staggering that it is not merely the means of resolving a story — it is the story. And the rich "window dressing" which surrounds the basic idea adds immeasurably to the author's bravado of conception.

Señor Borges is an important Argentinian literary figure — poet, critic, essayist, and anthologist. In all his work, especially in his fiction, the author employs the motif of a labyrinth — it is a persistent monomania, recurring in subtly changing variations, like (Mr. Boucher reminds us) the crutches in the paintings of Salvador Dali. In "The Garden of Forking Paths," Señor Borges's labyrinthine theme reaches its fullest expression.

Señor Borges's work reveals another persistent quirk: he has an inordinate fondness for mock scholarship. He will, for example, invent a completely apocryphal author or literary school and then write a long and delightfully learned dissertation on the esoteric importance of his imaginary figure or movement; but the fantasy and satire he weaves into his critical opinions are not always without factual significance. In one of his most brilliant essays, titled "An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain," there is the following remarkable paragraph:

"I have said that his first novel is a detective story, THE GOD OF THE LABYRINTH; I may add that its publisher placed the book on sale in the last days of November 1933. In the first week of December the agreeable

and arduous involutions of Ellery Queen's THE SIAMESE TWIN MYSTERY preoccupied New York and London; I prefer to attribute to this disastrous coincidence the total failure of our friend's novel. Also (I wish to be completely sincere) to its insufficiency of technique and to the empty and frigid pomp of certain descriptions of the sea. After seven years it is impossible for me to recall the details of the plot; but here is its plan, insofar as my memory impoverishes it (and perhaps purifies it). There is an indecipherable murder in the opening pages, a slow discussion of the crime in the middle ones, and a solution in the last pages. Once the riddle has been solved, there is one long retrospective paragraph which contains this sentence: 'Everyone believed that the two chess players had met by chance.' This sentence gives one to understand that the solution is in error. The uneasy reader returns to earlier chapters and now finds another solution, which is the true one. The reader of this singular book proves himself in the final analysis to be more perspicacious than the detective.'

Now you know what to expect!

THE GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS

by JORGE LUIS BORGES

(translated by Anthony Boucher)

ON PAGE 252 of Liddell Hart's *History of the World War* you may read that an offensive of thirteen British divisions supported by 1400 pieces of artillery, planned against the Serre-Montauban line for July 24, 1916, was postponed until the morning of the 29th.

The torrential rains, Captain Liddell Hart adds in a note, were responsible for this delay, an insignificant one in any case.

The following statement — dictated, reread, and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun, former professor of English in the *Hochschule* at Tsingtao, casts an

unsuspected light over the entire affair.

The first two pages of the statement are missing.

. . . and I hung up the receiver. As soon as I had done so, I recognized the voice which had answered in German. It was that of Captain Richard Madden. The presence of Madden in Viktor Runeberg's flat meant the end of our projects and — though this seemed, or should have seemed, of secondary importance to me — likewise the end of our lives. It meant that Runeberg had been

arrested, or murdered.* Before that day's sun should set, I would incur the same fate.

Madden was relentless. Or rather, circumstances compelled him to be relentless. An Irishman in the English service, a man accused of apathy and perhaps of treason, could hardly fail to seize gratefully upon this miraculous chance to uncover, capture, and possibly kill two agents of the German Reich.

I went up to my room. Absurdly I locked the door and threw myself down on the narrow iron cot. Through the window I saw the roofs I had always seen and the clouded sun of six o'clock. It seemed incredible that this day, so like all others, should be the day of my inevitable death. No premonitions. no symbols . . . My father was long dead, it was long ago that I was a child in the symmetrical garden of Hai Feng; but was I to die — and now? Then I reflected that all things happen to a man in the precise instant of now. Centuries pile upon centuries and only in the now can things happen; men innumerable fill the sea, the earth, the air, and all that really happens happens to me . . .

The almost intolerable memory of Madden's horse-like face cut short these wanderings. In the midst of my hatred and terror (the terror no longer

signifies, now that I have made a fool of Richard Madden, now that my throat longs for the noose), I remembered that this tumultuous and doubtless happy warrior had no suspicion that I possessed the Secret — the name of the precise location of the new British artillery station on the Ancre. A bird streaked across the gray sky and blindly I translated it into an airplane and this airplane into many that streaked through the French sky and annihilated the artillery station with vertical bombs. If my mouth, before a bullet destroyed it, could cry the name of that location so loudly that it might be heard in Germany . . . My human voice was weak. How could it reach the ear of the Chief? The ear of the sickly, hateful man who knew nothing of Runeberg and me save that we were in Staffordshire and that he vainly waited for word from us, sitting in his arid office in Berlin, endlessly nosing through newspapers . . .

I said aloud, "I must flee." I arose soundlessly, in a useless perfection of silence, as though Madden were already on my trail. Something — perhaps merely the vanity of proving my helplessness — made me look through my pockets. I found what I knew I would find: the American watch, the nickel chain with the square charm, the key ring with the useless and compromising keys to Runeberg's flat, the wallet, a letter which I decided to destroy at once (and did not destroy), a cigar, two shillings and a few coppers, the red-and-blue pen-

* An hypothesis at once repulsive and ridiculous. The Prussian spy Hans Rabener, *alias* Viktor Runeberg, used his automatic to attack Captain Richard Madden, who carried a warrant for his arrest. In self-defense Madden was obliged to inflict the wounds which resulted in the spy's death. — *Editor's Note.*

cil, the handkerchief, the revolver with one bullet. Absurdly I weighed it in my hand to give me courage. Vaguely I thought that a pistol shot could be heard over a long distance. In ten minutes my plan was complete. The telephone directory gave me the name of the only individual capable of transmitting my message; he lived in the suburb of Fenton, less than half an hour away by train.

I am a cowardly man. Now I can say it, now that I have carried out a plan the peril of which none can deny. I know the terror of that plan. I did not do it for Germany; I care nothing for a barbarous country which imposed upon me the humiliation of being a spy. Besides I know of one Englishman — an unassuming man — who to me ranks no whit below Goethe. I talked with him for not over an hour, but during that hour he was Goethe . . . I did this thing because I felt that the Chief held in scorn those of my race, the innumerable ancestors who flow together in me. I wished to prove to him that a man with yellow skin could save his armies. Moreover, I wanted to escape Captain Madden. At any moment his hands and his voice would pound against my door. I dressed silently, bade myself farewell in my mirror, and left the house.

It was a short distance to the station, but I thought it wiser to take a cab. I argued that I ran less risk of being recognized; actually it was because in the deserted street I felt visible and infinitely vulnerable. I

remember that I told the driver to stop a little before the main entrance. With difficulty I forced myself to get out casually, slowly; I was going to the village of Ashgrove but I bought a ticket for a station farther along the line. The train would leave in a very few minutes, at 8:50. I hurried; the next train was not until 9:30. There was almost no one on the platform. I looked over the coaches; I remember a few working men, a woman in mourning, a young man absorbed in the *Annals* of Tacitus, a wounded and happy soldier. At last the train pulled out. A man pursued it vainly to the edge of the platform. I recognized Captain Richard Madden. Shattered, trembling, I shrank into the opposite corner of the compartment, away from the terrifying window.

I passed from this shattered state to an almost abject contentment. I told myself that the duel had begun and that I had won the first encounter by thus frustrating — even if for only forty minutes, even if by a caprice of fate — the attack of my adversary. I argued that this least of victories foreshadowed the total victory. I argued that it was not so small a triumph, since but for this precious difference presented to me by the timetable I should now be imprisoned or dead. I argued (no less sophistically) that my cowardly contentment proved me a man capable of carrying out the adventure successfully. From this weakness I drew forces that were not to desert me.

I foresee that man will give himself

over with each day to more atrocious enterprises; soon there will be only warriors and bandits. To them I leave this counsel: *He who undertakes an atrocious enterprise must imagine that he has already accomplished it, must impose upon himself a future no less irrevocable than the past.* That was my course, while my eyes (the eyes of a man already dead) noted the liquidity of that day, which was perhaps the last, and the diffusion of the night.

The train ran smoothly through rows of ash trees. It stopped almost in the open country. No one called the name of the station. "Ashgrove?" I asked some children on the platform. "Ashgrove," they replied. I got off.

A lamp lit up the platform, but the children's faces remained in the zone of shadow. One boy asked me, "Are you going to Dr. Stephen Corbie's?" Without waiting for my answer another said, "The house is a long way off, but you won't get lost if you take the road to the left and turn to the left at every crossroads." I tossed them a coin (my last), went down a few stone steps, and entered the lonely road. Slowly I followed it. It was of unpaved earth; the branches mingled overhead, the low circular moon seemed to accompany me.

For one instant I thought that Captain Madden had in some manner realized my desperate intention. I soon understood that that was impossible. The advice always to turn to the left reminded me that such was the standard procedure for reaching the centre of certain mazes. I have

some knowledge of mazes; not for nothing am I the descendant of that Ts'ui Pên who was governor of Yunnan but renounced temporal power to write a novel which was to be yet more all-embracing than the Hung Lu Meng and to construct a maze in which no man might find his way. Thirteen years he devoted to these ill-assorted labors, but the hand of a stranger murdered him and the novel made no sense and no man found the maze.

Beneath English trees I meditated on this lost maze: I imagined it inviolate and perfect on the secret summit of some mountain; I imagined it erased by rice fields or sunk beneath water; I imagined it infinite, no longer constructed of octagonal kiosks and twisting paths, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms . . . I thought of a maze of mazes, a labyrinth of labyrinths, one sinuous waxing labyrinth that should include the past and the future and in some manner involve the stars.

Absorbed in these illusory images, I forgot the fate which pursued me. I felt myself, for a certain space of time, the abstract perceiver of the world. The limpid living countryside, the moon, the dying body of the evening worked upon me, and the slope of the road eliminated any possibility of weariness. The evening was intimate and infinite. The road descended and forked among the dimmed meadows. A shrill syllabic music drew near and faded in the shifting wind, swaddled in leaves and distance. I thought that

a man may be the enemy of other men, of other moments of other men, but not of a country: not of fireflies, words, gardens, watercourses, sunsets.

Thus I arrived before a tall and rusty gate. Through its grille I made out a grove of poplars and a small house. I understood suddenly two things, the first trivial, the second all but incredible: the music came from the house and the music was Chinese. This was why I had accepted it so fully and with so little curiosity. I do not recall whether there was a bell or whether I knocked. The music continued to sparkle.

But from the depth of the little house a lantern drew near, a lantern which sent out its rays to ring the trunks of the poplars, a paper lantern which had the shape of a drum and the color of the moon. A tall man bore it. I could not see his face; the light blinded me. He opened the gate and said slowly in my own language, "I observe that the pious Hsi P'êng has undertaken to correct my solitude. You wish no doubt to see the garden?"

I recognized the name of one of our consuls. Disconcerted, I repeated, "The garden?"

"The garden of forking paths."

Something stirred in my memory. With unaccountable certainty, I said, "The garden of my ancestor Ts'ui Pên."

"Your ancestor? Your illustrious ancestor? Come in."

The damp path zigzagged like those I knew in childhood. We entered a library of Eastern and Western books.

I recognized, bound in yellow silk, certain manuscript volumes of that Lost Encyclopedia edited by the Third Emperor of the Luminous Dynasty but never printed. The gramophone record revolved near a bronze phoenix. I remember too a porcelain jar of the Rose Family and another, many centuries older, of that blue which our craftsmen copied from the Persian potters.

Stephen Corbie was watching me with a smile. He was, as I said, very tall, sharp-featured, gray-eyed, gray-bearded. There was something of a priest about him, and also something of a sailor. Later he told me that he had been a missionary in Tientsin "before I sought to become a Sino-logue."

We seated ourselves, I on a long low divan, he with his back to the window and to the tall round clock. I calculated that I had an hour before the arrival of my pursuer, Captain Madden. My irrevocable resolve could wait.

"The fate of your ancestor Ts'ui Pên," said Stephen Corbie, "was astonishing. He was governor of his native province, learned in astronomy, in astrology, and in the unwearied exegesis of the canonical books, a master of chess, a famous poet and calligrapher — and all this he abandoned to compose a book and a maze. He renounced the pleasures alike of tyranny and of justice, of his well-populated couch, of banquets and even of learning; and for thirteen years he shut himself up in the

Pavilion of Limpid Solitude. On his death his heirs found nothing save chaotic manuscripts. His family, as you are perhaps aware, wished to have these burned; but his executor — a Taoist or Buddhist monk — insisted on their publication."

"We of the race of Ts'ui Pên," I replied, "continue to curse that monk. The publication was an absurd enterprise. The book is a shapeless accumulation of contradictory drafts. I have examined it somewhat: in Chapter Three the hero dies, in Chapter Four he is alive. As for Ts'ui Pên's other undertaking, the maze . . ."

"Here is the maze," he said, indicating a tall, lacquered desk.

"A marble maze!" I exclaimed. "A labyrinth in miniature . . ."

"A labyrinth of symbols," he corrected me. "An invisible labyrinth in time. It has fallen to my lot, English barbarian that I am, to unveil this diaphanous mystery. After more than a hundred years the details are lost irrevocably; but one may conjecture the course of events. Upon one occasion Ts'ui Pên announced: 'I am retiring to write a book.' Upon another: 'I am retiring to construct a maze.' Everyone thought of two undertakings; no one imagined that the book and the maze were one. The Pavilion of Limpid Solitude stood, let us say, in the centre of a rather intricate garden; this fact may have suggested a physical labyrinth. Ts'ui Pên died. In all the widespread lands that were his no man could find the maze. The

chaos of the novel suggested to me that book *itself* was the maze. Two circumstances gave me the correct solution to the problem. One: the curious legend that Ts'ui Pên had proposed to construct a labyrinth strictly infinite in its extension. The other: a fragment of a letter upon which I chanced."

Corbie rose. For a moment he turned his back to me and opened a drawer in the desk of black and gold lacquer. He returned with a sheet of once-crimson paper. Now it was pink and fragile and creased. Ts'ui Pên had been justly celebrated for his calligraphy. With excitement, without comprehension, I read the words which a man of my blood had traced with his minute brush: *I leave to the various futures (and not to all) my garden of forking paths.*

Wordlessly I returned the paper. Corbie continued:

"Before I unearthed this letter, I had constantly asked myself how a book could be infinite. I could imagine no other method than that of a cyclic, a circular volume. A volume whose last page should be identical with the first, thus possibly continuing indefinitely. I remembered too that night which stands in the centre of the Thousand and One Nights, when Queen Scheherazade (by some magical aberration of the copyist) begins to relate word for word the story of the Thousand and One Nights, incurring the danger of arriving once more at the night in which she tells the story of the Nights, and thus

continuing to infinity. I conceived also an hereditary work, transmitted from father to son, to which each new generation should add a chapter or correct with pious care the pages of its ancestors.

"These conjectures served to entertain me; but none of them seemed to correspond, even remotely, to the contradictory chapters of Ts'ui Pên. In this perplexity I received from Oxford the letter which you have examined. I paused, naturally, at the phrase: *I leave to the various futures (and not to all) my garden of forking paths*. Almost instantly I understood: the garden of forking paths was the chaotic novel; the phrase, *the various futures (and not all)*, suggested to my mind a forking, a bifurcation, not in space, but in time. Another survey of the work confirmed this theory. In all other works of fiction, a character confronted with various alternatives chooses one and eliminates the others. In this novel the character chooses — simultaneously — all of them. He thus *creates* varying futures, varying times, which in their turn likewise proliferate and fork. From this arise the 'contradictions' of the novel.

"Fang, let us say, has a secret; an unknown man raps at the door; Fang resolves to kill him. Naturally, this situation may resolve itself in several possible manners: Fang may kill the intruder, the intruder may kill Fang, both may survive, both may perish, and so on. In the work of Ts'ui Pên, *all* these resolutions occur; each one is the point of departure for further

forkings. Upon occasion the paths of this maze converge: for example, you arrive at my home; but in one of the possible pasts you are my friend, in another my enemy. If you will tolerate my incurable accent, we shall read a few pages."

In the vivid circle of lamplight his face was unquestionably that of an old man; but there was something unbreakable about it, even immortal. He read, with slow precision, two versions of the same epic chapter. In the first, an army marches toward battle across a barren mountain; the horror of the rocks and shadows causes them to hold their lives cheap and they gain an easy victory. In the second, the same army passes through a palace where a festival is in progress; the glittering battle seems to them a continuation of the festival and they gain an easy victory. With seemly veneration I listened to these ancient narratives, perhaps less admirable in themselves than because my blood had conceived them and because a man of a remote Empire had restored them to me in the course of a desperate adventure in a Western isle. I remember the last words, repeated in each version like a hidden commandment: *Thus did the heroes fight, peace in their noble hearts and violence in their swords, resolved to kill and to die.*

From that moment on I felt about me and within me an invisible, intangible swarming. Not the swarming of the divergent, parallel, ultimately coalescing armies, but an agitation at once more inaccessible and more

intimate, which the armies in some manner prefigured. Stephen Corbie continued:

"I do not believe that your illustrious ancestor was playing an idle game with his variations. I do not find it plausible that he should sacrifice thirteen years in the infinite execution of a rhetorical experiment. In your country the novel is a subsidiary form of literature; in his time it was even a contemptible one. Ts'ui Pên was a novelist of genius, but he was also a man of letters who assuredly did not consider himself a mere novelist. The evidence of his contemporaries demonstrates (and his own life confirms) his leanings toward the metaphysical, the mystical. Philosophical debate usurps a large portion of the novel. From other sources I know that of all problems none so perturbed and beset him as the abysmal problem of Time. And yet, that is the *only* problem which does not figure in the pages of *The Garden*. Not once does he employ even the very character which means Time. How do you account for this deliberate omission?"

I advanced various solutions, none of them satisfactory. We discussed them, and at last Stephen Corbie said:

"In a riddle the answer to which is 'chess,' what is the one forbidden word?"

I reflected a moment and answered, "The word *chess*."

"Precisely," said Corbie. "*The Garden of Forking Paths* is a vast riddle, or parable, whose meaning is

Time; that recondite cause forbids the mention of the word. Always to omit a word, to seek refuge in inept metaphors or blatant periphrases, is perhaps the most emphatic method of stressing that word. It is the tortuous method preferred, in each meandering of his indefatigable novel, by the oblique Ts'ui Pên. I have collated hundreds of manuscripts, I have corrected the errors introduced by the carelessness of copyists, I have conjectured the plan of this chaos, I have reestablished (I believe) the primordial order, I have translated the entire work — constantly struck by the fact that the translation never once necessitated the use of the word *time*. The explanation is obvious: *The Garden of Forking Paths* is an image, incomplete but not inaccurate, of the universe as Ts'ui Pên conceived it.

"Your ancestor differed from Newton and Schopenhauer in not believing in one uniform and absolute Time. He believed in an infinite series of Time, in a waxing, dizzying web of times, divergent, convergent, and parallel. This network of times which draw near each other, fork out of each other, cut across each other, or know nothing of each other for centuries — these times embrace *all* possibilities. In most of these times we do not exist. In some you exist and I do not; in others I but not you; in yet others, both of us. In this time a favorable fate has granted that you enter my house; in another, you found me dead as you crossed the garden; in another, I am saying these very

words, but I am an illusion, a phantom."

"In all times," I pronounced, not without a tremor, "I offer you my gratitude and veneration for your remaking of the garden of Ts'ui Pên."

"Not in all," he murmured smiling. "Time forks forever toward innumerable futures. In one of them I am your enemy."

Once more I felt that swarming of which I spoke. It seemed to me that the moist garden outside the house was infinitely saturated with invisible personages. And all of them were Corbie and I, vowed to other secrets, laden with other tasks, shaped in other forms in other dimensions of time. I raised my eyes; the tenuous nightmare dissolved. In the yellow and black garden there was only one man; but that man was strong as a statue; that man was coming toward me down the path and he was Captain Richard Madden.

"The future exists already," I said, "but I am your friend. May I look at the letter again?"

Corbie rose. The tall old man opened the drawer of the tall desk; for a moment he turned his back on me. I had the revolver ready. I fired with the utmost care; Corbie fell immediately, without a word. I swear that his death was instantaneous, a lightning-stroke.

The rest is unreal and insignificant. Captain Madden burst in and arrested me. I have been sentenced to hang. And I have won abominably; I have communicated to Berlin the secret name of the city which they must attack. They bombed it yesterday; I read that in the very papers which presented the English people with the puzzle of why the learned Sinologue Stephen Corbie should have been murdered by a stranger, Yu Tsun. The Chief has deciphered this puzzle. He knows that my problem was how to indicate (across the uproar of the war) the city called Corbie and that *I found no other solution save to murder a man of that name.*

He does not know (no one can know) my unspeakable regret and weariness.

