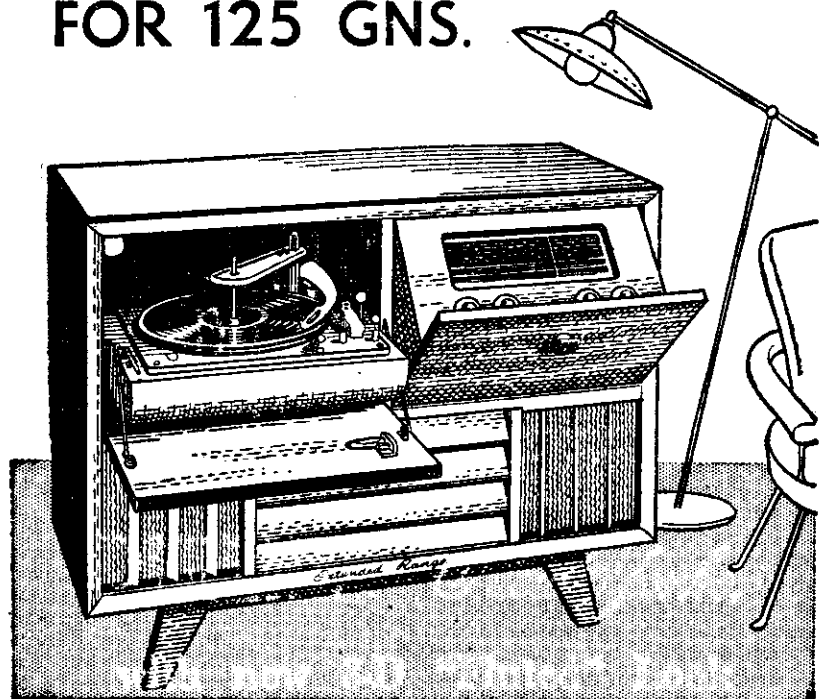


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A Man Who Nearly Wasn't

MOST readers of thrillers will have made the acquaintance of James Bond, a secret agent who has passed violently through five novels by Ian Fleming. The latest of these books* caused a sensation by ending on a discord. In the tradition of his kind Bond is indestructible. He kills efficiently and with relish, especially when he is liquidating Communist agents, who are so far beyond the reach of sympathy that their sudden and gruesome deaths may be enjoyed without uneasiness. To make the reader's response quite safe, the enemies are not only Communists; they are also excessively wicked. The combination of political and personal infamy is so potent that Bond's own cruelty becomes merely a tight-lipped devotion to duty, and to feel compunction for the victims would be almost a confession of political unreliability. This licensed sadism is no doubt profitable to the author, especially since he tells a good story and takes loving care with his backgrounds. It was therefore surprising and even shocking to find on the last page of the new novel that Bond was lapsing into unconsciousness, with every prospect of joining the men whose deaths he had encompassed with cool ferocity.

Outside fiction, it would not have been unfitting for Bond to be cut off suddenly like Hamlet's father, "full of bread, with all his crimes broad blown." But the world of make-believe is different; and presently, as sounds of dismay were heard, author and publisher felt obliged to make a statement. Letters to the *New Statesman* and *Times Literary Supplement* quoted a medical bulletin which explained that Bond was suffering from "severe Fugu poisoning (a particularly virulent member of the curare group obtained from the sex glands of Japanese Globe fish)," and that a course of treatment was proving successful. So Bond, it seemed, had escaped again. But a question remains: Why did Ian Fleming write an ambiguous conclusion? At the literary level on which he works there is no room for doubt; the customers expect to know on the last page that Bond has triumphed and will be happy for a time with the girl who looks like Greta Garbo. Had the author decided that James Bond, in spite of his value as a literary property, was now an insupportable weight? Did he want to escape from that peculiar slavery which grips a man who finds that he must produce a best-seller once a year? If he were indeed tempted to become a free man, the brief madness is over. But he may approach the next adventure with special care and a little anxiety. As John Raymond observed, quoting another critic: "Sherlock Holmes may have recovered from that fall over the Upper Reichenbach with Professor Moriarty, but he was never the same man afterwards."

English critics may not have been shocked (they are a tough lot nowadays), but they were certainly surprised. Said John Raymond in the *New Statesman*: "... This strangely immature thug-connoisseur of love and Béarnaise sauce had, at the moment of death, at least one million and a quarter followers in this kingdom alone, leaving aside the book-spongers, book-stealers, library-goers and fans in the United States of America." It seemed incredible that the source of so much glory and cash, especially cash, could have been removed by a kick on the shin from a female Russian with poison on the tip of her shoe. She was, admittedly, a special sort of Russian—no less than the head of *Smersh*, an organisation devoted to the killing of spies. But all through the book the heroic Bond

*FROM RUSSIA, WITH LOVE, by Ian Fleming; Jonathan Cape, English price 13/6.

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, JULY 19, 1957.