

In the air

# Black Magic

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**One evening recently, two men walked up to the counter of one of London's most fashionable clubs and asked the barman to make them a cocktail - the most expensive one he could think up.**

The barman thought. He poured, mixed, shook and finally served up a concoction consisting of cognac costing £3.000 a bottle, the finest champagne, lemongrass and lychees and an extract of yohimbe bark from West Africa, reputedly an aphrodisiac.

Each drink cost the modest sum of £333, about 485 €.

The two men – unsurprisingly bankers by trade – treated their guests to two rounds of what the bartender called „*Magie Noire*“. The bill for their table of eight came to £15.000, about 22.375 €.

No, I am not making this up. I read the story in the *Guardian* (\*) and its hideous perversity won't leave me alone.

I keep wondering what went through the barman's mind as he worked on the drinks for the two men.

Did a certain professional pride in his creation make up for the totally outrageous sum involved? Was he out to „*make idiots like that pay the price*“?

Did he shake his head as he shook the mixer, a man who in his trade sees this sort of thing all the time?

Or was he musing, as he mixed, how many months' of his salary „*Magie Noire*“ was costing his clients?

A recent survey revealed that his countrymen's average gross income amounts to £2.400 per household per month. So what our bankers plugged down in a couple of hours would have kept a family alive for over six months. And our barman? We all know that wages in the catering business are notoriously low, supposedly being eked out by tips. I wonder how generous our bankers were: did they leave him the customary 10% that would have given him £1.500? It seems unlikely.

As he reached for the Dom Perignon, did he perhaps think of the things he could have bought his family with the money? What with Christmas coming up and all the extra expense ...

The same survey estimated the average expenditure of a UK family at £435 per month, of which about 14% went on transport, just over 10% on food and drinks (non alcoholic), 10% on housing, fuel and power and just under 5% on clothing and footwear.

And that is a reasonably prosperous European country. Many people in West Africa, where the bankers' yo-



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himbe bark came from, exist on less than £5 a month.

Or perhaps the barman's thoughts were straying further afield – the decor of his club is after all „*inspired by the magic and mystery of the African continent*.“ He may have read one of the appeals for donations to buy the drugs necessary to save the life of an HIV sufferer. Some 26 million of the 40 million people worldwide who are HIV positive live in sub-Saharan Africa. They need a cocktail too, not one mixed by a barman but one produced by a pharmaceutical company; not made up of cognac and champagne but of three antiretroviral drugs that keep virus levels low in the body.

It takes just £15 a month to save a life.

Had our eight bankers written a cheque instead of going on their drinking spree, they could have helped keep eight other humans alive for over 10 years.

But today's world is not like that. Governments stand by – if they are not actively encouraging the trend – while the rich become the super rich and the poor become poorer. The seventies' expression „*the unacceptable face of capitalism*“ is rarely heard these days.

And most ordinary citizens live on the endless diet they are fed of glamorous tales about super rich celebrities, like children reading fairy-tales.

And no one does anything. Perhaps, quite simply, those who could do something do not care, or count on the new „*opium of the people*“ – the celebrity fairy-tales, TV soaps and programmes such as „*How to make a million*“ – to anaesthetise any feeling of injustice.

All this remind one of Michel de Montaigne's famous essay „*Des Cannibales*.“ He uses the device of observations made by visitors from a foreign land to criticize the flagrant inequalities in his own country: „*Ils avaient aperçu qu'il y avait parmi nous des hommes pleins et gorgés de toutes sortes de commodités, et que leurs moitiés étaient mendiants à leurs portes, décharnés de faim et de pauvreté; et*

*trouvaient étrange comme ces moitiés ici nécessiteuses pouvaient souffrir une telle injustice, qu'ils ne prissent les autres à la gorge, ou missent le feu à leurs maisons.*“

In recent weeks, we've seen les *moitiés nécessiteuses* burning houses – and cars and schools – and lobbing Molotov cocktails, these latter not concocted by a barman either. Fires are destructive but also spectacular and attract the TV cameras to what's being burnt. Perhaps even to the desperate people doing the burning.

But in today's society, you do not have to live on a shattered sink estate to be angry and frustrated. It is enough not to be one of the super rich.

In the real world, corporations carry on sacking as many employees as they can get away with and paying the rest as little as possible, in the name not of survival but of profit. At the same time, every force of persuasion – from advertisements and shopping channels to the psychologically studied layout of your local supermarket – urges people to consume. Fine if you're a rich banker; not fine if you're a poor barman.

If we don't all become opium-eaters, how long before these two contradictory forces clash and drag us all down in a maelstrom of violence?

How long are we prepared to go on letting a minority guzzle £333 cocktails while others cannot make ends meet?

How long before enough people realise we are no longer on the road of social progress but have made a U-turn and are heading back to the Middle Ages, with the very rich and the very poor – the king in his castle and the beggar at his gate – and no one in between ...?

Meanwhile, though, the season of „*peace on earth and goodwill to all men*“ is upon us once more. So let's all admire the pretty lights and sing along to the catchy tunes.

Forget Black Magic. Think White Christmas.

-> (\*) story reported by J. Freedland, 23.11.05