

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

A fictional account of the true story of the disappearance of the socialist politician Victor Grayson, the prose may be unpleasant – but so is the protagonist

Green Ink

By **Stephen May**
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Victor Grayson, who is the subject of this book, was the Lord Lucan of his day, though he possessed an infinitely more intriguing character than the rather dim earl with a title made famous by the Crimean War, who scraped a living at the gambling table until he disap-

peared to avoid questioning about the murder of his children's nanny and an attack on his wife in November 1974.

Grayson, who vanished just as completely in September 1920, was a gambler too in a variety of different ways, which required greater resourcefulness than

Lucan ever possessed. Unlike Lucan, he had an hour of glory. His two great assets in life, which began in the Liverpool slums, were a handsome figure and a silver tongue. He used them to dramatic effect at the age of 25 to capture the safe Liberal seat of Colne Valley in Yorkshire at a sensational by-election in 1907, standing as a revolutionary socialist without any formal party organisation behind him. Vladimir Lenin, the Bolshevik leader, watching from his Swiss exile, was unimpressed by this victory for left-wing extremism. Grayson, he said, was a man "without any principles who was given to mere phrases". He was right. Grayson was a remarkable mob

orator who never attempted to develop a serious political programme which would advance the cause of socialism.

In Parliament he made enemies everywhere, particularly among the group of Britain's first Labour MPs, who hated his extremism. They rejoiced when he

was defeated at the next general election in 1910. Later they ensured that he would never be an MP again by securing evidence of his homosexuality. The Labour leadership acquired some of his love letters to another young socialist, describing graphically their "devouring passion" for each other.

After losing his seat and discarding his socialist rhetoric, Grayson did not fade from the public eye. He served for a time on the Western Front in a New Zealand regiment before establishing himself in some style, though without visible means of support, near Piccadilly. Some who have studied his disappearance argue that he became a close associate of the most notorious of all honours brokers, the sinister, gay Maundy Gregory who sold titles from an office in Whitehall. This seems unlikely since he publicly denounced David Lloyd George's money-making ventures in an attempt to revive his political career.

Stephen May, author of six previous books, has now brought his lively imagination to bear on the unsolved mystery of Grayson's disappearance 105 years ago when he was 39. He focuses on the day towards the end of September 1920 when Grayson vanished,

drawing in key features of his earlier misspent life to fill out the story.

May depicts a debauched life of sex and drink, which the few surviving facts from 1920 support. He also provides a cast of enemies, headed by Lloyd George, who appears here at his most unscrupulous. May's rasping, brittle prose is often unattractive, but it helps convey the debased standards which, he insists, were prevalent everywhere after the First World War.

It is hard to grieve for the loss of Victor Grayson. Some within the Labour Party have over the years revered him as a lost leader, who could have added greatly to its strength. In reality he was a complete charlatan. The facts about his life which Stephen May weaves into his fiction leave little doubt about that.



Trafalgar Square, 1909 Victor Grayson addresses a rally

