

BRITAIN

The Missing M.P.

By all accounts, British M.P. and Financier John Stonehouse was a mysterious man. "He was a complete loner," says one parliamentary colleague. "I don't think he had a single close friend in the House." Even his wife recently observed sarcastically that "I was apparently married all those years to a man whose life was stranger than fiction." So, perhaps, was his death. On the afternoon of Nov. 21, Stonehouse, 49, seemingly in good spirits, set off on a jog down the beach at Miami's Fontainebleau Hotel, in full view of the lifeguards. Nobody saw him enter the water, but that evening attendants found his clothes still hanging in a cabana at the Fontainebleau along with more than \$800 in cash and traveler's checks. The former Labor Cabinet minister has been missing ever since.

Secret Agent. At first, accidental drowning seemed the most likely explanation, despite Stonehouse's prowess as a swimmer. But in the weeks since his disappearance, assorted rumors have turned the case into a riveting political whodunit. Some have claimed that Stonehouse was a secret CIA agent; others have suggested Mafia connections. Last week a Czech spy defector named Josip Frolik, who now lives in the U.S. under an assumed name, said that Stonehouse—who was widely known to be a rabid anti-Communist—was in fact a fellow secret agent. In the House of Commons, Prime Minister Harold Wilson angrily denied the charge.

What could not be denied was that Stonehouse had become entangled in a complex web of financial ventures. The

son of a port office maintenance engineer, Stonehouse did a stint as an R.A.F. pilot during World War II, then studied political science at the University of London. Handsome and energetic, he was briefly a rising star in the Labor Party, winning his first seat in the House of Commons in 1957. In 1964, during Wilson's first term as Prime Minister, he served as Aviation Minister and later as Postmaster General. He was not offered a post in the new Labor government, however, because of his reputation as an unreliable maverick. Nonetheless, according to his family, Stonehouse was trying to build up a fortune in preparation for an eventual bid for the Labor Party leadership.

Two Bombs. Lately, though, some of his activities had been running into trouble. A wine company that he owned called *Connoisseurs of Claret, Ltd.* lost more than \$100,000 in 1973. The general manager of the London Capital Group, a dizzy assortment of investment interests controlled by Stonehouse, and the managing director of his trading company, *Global Imex*, both resigned last summer claiming that Stonehouse owed them \$35,000. Stonehouse put a country house that he bought two years ago up for sale and closed *Global Imex's* office in Bangladesh. It was apparently in search of additional financing for his beleaguered companies that Stonehouse flew to Florida in November.

Stonehouse's far-flung interests and their problems have led some to suspect that he might have been killed. "He made enemies all over the world," says M.P. and former Parliamentary Private Secretary William Molloy. "At some point," speculated another colleague, "he may have crossed somebody's path and they did him in." That possibility



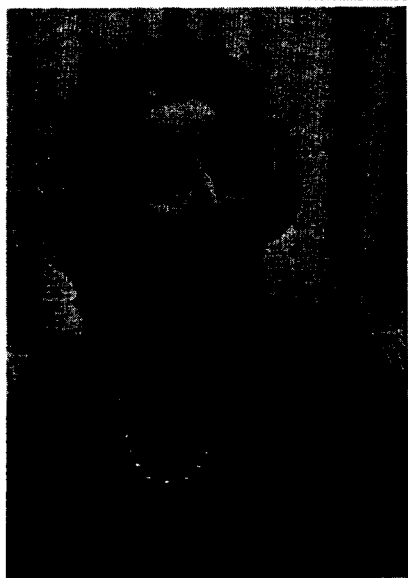
PANTELLERIA'S MAYOR REMIREZ

gained credence when Miami police found traces of blood and hair, along with a recent imprint of a body, inside a 300-lb. "concrete overcoat" of the type used by the Mafia for burials at sea. Unfortunately for investigators, the body inside the casement was missing, and the Florida police declared that there was as yet no reason to connect the two cases. One other puzzling fact: Stonehouse's wife, who has stuck to her assumption that he drowned at sea, first denied and then later admitted that she had taken out some \$160,000 in insurance policies on her husband's life in recent months. She insists that the timing was pure coincidence, while allowing that it was a "jolly inconvenient" time in the light of subsequent events. In any case, she did have ample reason to take out extra life insurance on her husband. Last summer Stonehouse's car was blown up by one bomb and another was found in a house adjoining theirs in London.

New Life. Nonetheless, Stonehouse could have died a natural death at sea, although local residents say that the tides eventually wash up the bodies of those who drown. Virtually all of his associates rule out the possibility of suicide on the grounds that he was too optimistic and self-assured to take his own life. That leaves a more fanciful possibility: perhaps Stonehouse's business difficulties, or some other unsuspected problem, led him to jog quietly from one life into a more anonymous incarnation. As one investigator points out, such disappearing acts are done every day. "You go to the graveyard, get a name, get a birth certificate, then a Social Security number, and you're a new person." That may seem unlikely for a man who hoped to be leader of the Labor Party. But until some new evidence turns up, virtually all explanations of the stranger-than-fiction case of John Stonehouse have equal plausibility.

PICTORIAL PARADE

KEYSTONE



MRS. BARBARA STONEHOUSE



LABOR M.P. & FINANCIER JOHN STONEHOUSE

A life, and perhaps a death, that was stranger than fiction.