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Easy!**





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MAKE CHRISTMAS EASY!

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2024 edition

Sparkling Books

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KEEP THE KIDS OCCUPIED

PEREGRINE HARKER AND THE BLACK DEATH - ADVENTURE FOR BOYS

This book is suitable for ages 8 to 14 according to reading ability

MURDER. SPIES. EXPLOSIONS. REVENGE.

This book has it all.

London 1908: A secret society stalks the murky streets, a deadly assassin lurks in the shadows and a series of unexplained deaths are linked by a mystery symbol...

When boy-detective Peregrine Harker stumbles across a gruesome murder he sparks a chain of events that drag him on a rip-roaring journey through a world of spluttering gas lamps, thick fog, deadly secrets and dastardly villains.

Every step of Peregrine's white-knuckle adventure brings him closer to the vile heart of a terrifying mystery – the true story behind the Brotherhood of the Black Death.

Reviews

"Such a great fast paced book... FUN FUN read!!!"

Michelle Parsons, Librarian, USA

"One hell of a lot of fun! Readers of all ages will gobble up this non-stop rip roaring adventure – don't miss this one!"

Bill Baker, Educator, USA

"I am so excited to discover an adventure book with a boy for the protagonist/narrator. Peregrine is such a great character and one I think middle grade students (especially boys) will fall in love with. The story is highly imaginative and original, and I love how the plot was fast paced."

The Hopeful Heroine Blog

"Part Sherlock Holmes. Part Indiana Jones. Peregrine Harker and the Black Death was a quick, enjoyable read. I could easily see my former students or future patrons flying through this book ... A great middle-grade mystery novel that will keep readers hooked from the first page. Well done!"

“Thank you Luke Hollands for a great book. The pace of this book was quick and for mystery lovers, fairly easy to see who was behind all that happened to Peregrine. Luke threw in two great twists in the end that were great. I believe for my young boys who are reluctant readers, they will enjoy the story and pace of it. I will be purchasing this for my middle school library”

Jennifer Cabbage, Educator, USA

“... The most engaging thing about this novel is the style and narrative voice. Harker tells his own story as a first-person narrator. His tone throughout is self-assured, even somewhat cavalier, even when faced with dangerous circumstances. This cavalier tone marks Harker as the shining, confident hero, bound to triumph. For example, when involved in a shootout, during a car chase, Harker remarks that, ‘Despite the fact that someone was trying to kill me, I was rather enjoying myself.’ This sense that danger is terribly exciting pervades the novel and makes it pleasant to read. This tone also serves to reassure young readers that Harker is bound to come through such difficulty relatively unscathed.

Combined with Harker’s self-assured tone, is a marked lack of realism, which also reminds us that Harker will ultimately succeed in getting to the bottom of his mystery. We can actually enjoy the danger that he finds himself in partly because the very nature of the danger and the way that the various villains are presented as caricatures reminds us that Harker is actually not a real child in our mundane world. This lack of realism is almost like a safety net, allowing us to not have to fear for Harker’s safety.

Harker’s adventures are a romp through the seedy criminal side of early 20th Century London. Hollands seems to draw on such diverse literary traditions and figures as Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, E. Nesbit’s adventuring children characters, and Barrie’s Peter Pan, all while maintaining a tone that is unique to Hollands. This tone is sure to appeal to contemporary child readers.

... This book serves to fill part of the gap that seems to exist in the world of non-fantasy middle school readers aimed specifically at boys. As such, it should be a welcome addition to schools and libraries.

“For those who have been crying out for more ‘boy’ books in Middle Grade, here’s one for you. *Peregrine Harker* is very much a boy’s adventure novel. It’s a fast paced read, focusing on the adventures of the title character as he uses his intrepid journalistic skills to uncover a plot bound up in tea and smuggling. There are chases, rescues, twists, and a pretty satisfying resolution that gives readers the idea that more may be coming from Harker and company.

The novel is written in the Victorian/Edwardian style of adventure books. If you’re a fan of steampunk, this should appeal to you as well—there’s some gadgetry going on, not to mention an amazing car (with a sort of driver/butler/bodyguard), and a few steampunkish tropes that pop up to give the book an “out of time” feel. There’s a bit of the penny dreadful in the novel as well, what with a damsel (not usually in distress as she rescues the hero quite often) who is to be married off against her will to some ne’er-do-well who is the sworn enemy of the hero.

Reading it I was reminded of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and of Alan Moore’s *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. A strange mashup, I know, but that’s what hit me when I would put the book down. It makes it hard to categorize. I was also reminded of Kim Newman’s *Anno Dracula*, but I think that had to do with the Victorian references...

The story is well told and blasts along at a good clip, with some truly fun action scenes. At base, it is a detective story and the mystery is engaging and fun with the right amount of menace. I enjoyed the secondary characters more than Peregrine himself, as sometimes he seemed more like a piece that got us into the action with the really interesting people. Oh the whole, I’d recommend this to anyone who enjoys steampunk and historical fiction with a detective bent.”

Jeannette Battista, USA

Luke Hollands’ debut *Peregrine Harker and the Black Death* is a fun adventure set in a time long-past where mysteries were daydreams, and danger a way of life for over-curious detectives. Hollands’ world is explored by his young protagonist, Peregrine, as he strives to uncover the surprisingly intriguing mystery surrounding the sudden shortage of tea.

Peregrine isn't one of those protagonists who immediately comes off as haughty, attractive, and confident--instead, he is rather flawed and easily distracted...No, what I liked was the slow build-up into the main revelation of the story--and it is huge and very satisfyingly unexpected. Though the novel is quite short, Hollands does have a skill for pacing and keeping the reader intrigued as the mysteries mount.

The characters we meet along the way are all quirky and fit the stereotypical image we may sometimes have of mysterious people detectives often face..."

Dayla Fuentes-Morales, Canada

"...It is definitely a book for young boys, preferably reluctant readers who like a lot of adventure with chases and a minimal amount of girls/mushy stuff.

Peregrine Harker is a rich kid orphan turned journalist in Edwardian England, circa 1908. His newspaper boss has sent him to investigate tea as the price has jumped significantly of late and soon it will be so high that your average British citizen will not be able to have a cuppa every day like normal. Instead of finding out about tea, Peregrine gets sucked into a secret smuggling ring, strange deaths, harrowing car chases and double-crossing lords. There's even a damsel in distress or so he thinks. Will Peregrine ever get his story? Will he figure out who is in charge of the smuggling ring? And just who is the Black Death and what is their connection to all of this? To find out, read this exciting book! Recommended for ages 10-15." – *Rachel Huddlestone, Librarian, USA*

"Peregrine is fifteen so he's really more teen than boy detective, and orphan is a bit misleading. His explorer parents went missing years ago in Peru and for me: no body = no death. It also seems that a taste for action, adventure and danger runs in the family.

A lover of Penny Dreadfuls, Peregrine has a hard time reporting on boring subjects, which means he generally turns in fantastical stories his editor cannot publish. He's given one more chance to redeem himself and is sent to speak to a tea merchant about the sudden rising price of tea due to missing cargo. How will the Empire cope? Not something Peregrine finds exciting enough at all, so when he spies two sketchy characters on the docks, apparently up to no good, he decides to investigate. Unfortunately he's caught and finds himself locked up in a coffin.

That's not the only scrape our hero gets into: underground boxing matches, daring escapes through tunnels in Paris, motorcar chases, informants turning up dead, a childhood rival, a girl with a penchant for showing up in dangerous situations, and an order known as The Black Death out to stop Peregrine and anyone who gets in their way. It seems there's a lot more to this missing tea business than previously thought. This is confirmed when Peregrine runs into his slightly older cousin Archie Dearlove who tells him there's a smuggling ring tied into all this and that he'd like Peregrine's help solving the mystery! Finally, a story Peregrine can really sink his journalistic teeth into. If he doesn't die in the meantime...

The cast of characters is colorful and the author does a great job of introducing the time period without getting too descriptive, which I think is very important in a book geared to younger audiences.

Overall the story is a lot of fun, but despite Peregrine's age it reads more for a younger crowd, and given everything kids are exposed to in media today, I think the murders aren't really all that shocking. Definitely 10yrs+."

Alicia Wheeler, USA

"This is an ideal book for readers aged 'tweens' and up; it is filled with mystery, action, adventure, thrills, spills and dire peril - and not too long either.

Written in the style of a 'penny dreadful' and incorporating a satisfying amount of historical detail about the early twentieth century Europe in the process, we meet the brave young detective Peregrine Harker who investigates some mysterious deaths and quickly finds that learning too much about The Brotherhood of the Black Death carries risks and his own life is now in mortal peril.

This book races along at breakneck speed, carrying the reader gasping and breathless to the highly satisfying conclusion. A fun children's book, sure to be popular with the majority of youngsters."

Sian Williams, UK

"I loved it! I felt that this book was equal parts Rin Tin Tin (minus the dog), Indiana Jones, The Secret Life of Walter Mitty and Sherlock Holmes all wrapped up in the 15 year old protagonist. This is a book primarily for the male reader, probably ages ten to

fifteen. But, that is what gives this book its appeal. It's a great mix of history and the fantastical, of the dreams of a young boy with a head full of stories and the amazing stories that can actually take place.

Our young hero, a young and very green journalist, is dispatched by his editor to examine a story regarding something distinctly British – tea. And yet, when young Harker reaches the crux of his search, we find out that tea is not the root of the problem, but something much more sinister and engrossing.

This book had me in its clutches from the first page. I felt like I was reading one of those old dime-store novels that I used to find tucked away in the far, unreached corners of my library as a child. It was exciting, kept my interest from the start and I genuinely cared about Mr. Harker...

I could definitely see how this text could be incorporated into the classroom. It fits perfectly with a lesson that would, in tandem, teach history and literature as well as British culture. If nothing else, it is a text that any teacher should be proud to have on their shelves, available to lend to voracious readers and hard-to-please readers alike.”

Hope Thomas, USA

A Ripping Yarn and an Engaging Hero

“I know this is a cliché, but bear with me. Start with the Hardy Boys. Or at least with the can do, gee whiz, boy detective vibe. Now put that in 1908 England. Amp up the violence a little by introducing a few bodies, poison and gun-play. Make the plot more twists and turns than just smugglers hiding in a cave.

Then, add an earnest young reporter/detective with a sincere narrative style, a bit of a romantic streak, a droll sense of humor and an inclination toward deadpan descriptions.

This is a stock sort of character, but there is a good reason why this character keeps popping up. He is the enduring embodiment of adventure, excitement, danger!, action and derring-do. And, everything is improved when you add a romantic interest in the form of a girl with spirit and twinkling eyes, and a pal with a revolver. Once you sprinkle in a range of secondary characters who you may trust, or perhaps not, and a shady society of villains, you're set.

The last piece of the puzzle is the author. Does he have the skill to keep this mix moving forward, to keep all the balls in the air, and to keep you interested in and rooting for the hero. The answer here is "yes". Mr. Hollands doesn't get cute and he doesn't reach too far. This is action/adventure and he keeps the wheels turning with writing that doesn't fail, and that is complemented by some some nice touches and sharp observations that elevate the work beyond mere pulp, (not that I'm faulting mere pulp).

This is pure unadulterated entertainment and it works. There's no magic or fantasy; this is old fashioned action. But sometimes that's what you want, and for a tween or young YA reader this could be just right."

Joel Smith, USA

Preview of Peregrine Harker & The Black Death, by Luke Hollands ISBN 9781907230325 (print), 9781907230493 (epub)

1. One-way ticket to hell

Dr Quintus Crick was a traitor. A traitor and a thief to be precise. Which is why he was about to die.

The good doctor had no way of knowing he was soon to meet his match, the brave boy detective Peregrine Harker. This was fortunate as young Peregrine was sitting but a foot from his delicately polished brogues, in the dining car of the express train to Dover.

As the locomotive thundered towards the Kent coast, Peregrine studied the face of the man sitting opposite him. It was cold and clammy, like that of a dead fish; his lips were little more than a red scar, clamped tightly together, while his eyes were hidden behind a pair of round smoked glasses. Peregrine watched as the doctor raised a long thin bony hand and smoothed back a lock of his oily black hair.

Catching Dr Crick had been the toughest case in Peregrine's career. It had been a gruelling six months since the Prime Minister himself had asked Peregrine to look into the matter personally, and had promised him a knighthood for his troubles. The case had taken him on a merry dance through the cobbled streets of foggy London, to the bustling Souks of Constantinople and around the opera houses of Vienna. All the

way he had been ably assisted by his beautiful companion, the ever-brave Miss Petunia Goodheart, the Prime Minister's niece. Now, sitting here on the 9.15 from Victoria, he was finally face-to-face with the evil genius who had stolen none other than the Crown Jewels.

Dr Crick took a sip of coffee from the bone china cup in front of him. His clammy features briefly contorted into a grimace.

"Excuse me, young man," he hissed at Peregrine, lisping through a set of crooked teeth. "Would you please pass the sugar bowl?"

"Of course," replied Peregrine smugly, sliding the bowl of sugar lumps across the table that separated them. "But only if you give me the Crown Jewels in return, you despicable bounder."

Dr Crick's pale face briefly flushed red and he let out a world-weary sigh, less in desperation or fear, and more in mild annoyance, as if someone had just asked him to lend them a ten-bob note. He gave a brief manic chuckle.

"I suspected they would send someone after me," he spat viciously. "But I did not expect them to send a child. What makes you think I'm going to give you my spoils, boy?"

"Because if you don't," said Peregrine, smiling in return, "you'll be dead."

As soon as the words had left his mouth, Peregrine pulled back the hammer of the trusty service revolver he had concealed under the table. It was now pointing right at Crick's stomach.

"Ah, you mean to shoot me," chuckled Crick, hearing the click of the revolver, "on a train, surrounded by witnesses. Well, I would like to see you try, young man; but unfortunately I shall not have that pleasure because long before you pull that trigger you shall be dead, killed by the poison I placed in your coffee. Yes, that's right. I suspected you had been sent from Scotland Yard the very moment you chose to sit opposite me and while I shall be boarding a ferry to France this afternoon, the undertaker will be measuring you for a coffin," he finished with a wild laugh.

Peregrine sat quietly for a second and without a hint of fear on his stony face picked up his coffee cup and drank down every last drop in one satisfied gulp.

“Ah, you are quite right, Dr Crick; there is something wrong with my coffee,” he said coolly. “It is a little too sweet for my liking. I never take sugar with a hot beverage, whereas you always do,” he said, reaching across the table and switching his cup for the doctor’s, “do you not?”

Dr Crick’s face took on a puzzled look. Whatever was the boy blithering about, and then it hit him. He had poisoned his own coffee!

“That’s right, Dr Crick; I switched our cups not ten minutes ago, as we passed through that tunnel. So while this afternoon the undertaker will be measuring you for a coffin, I shall be having tea and crumpets with the King himself.”

Crick’s face turned even paler than before. He looked down at his cup, he had sipped at least half of it, more than enough for a fatal dose. He reached for his chest and let out a quiet agonising gasp. The boy was right, he could feel the poison working its deadly effects already.

“You may kill me, boy,” he hissed. “But you will not be able to save your delightful companion Miss Goodheart. For in ten minutes she will be dead, crushed by the wheels of this train. She is tied to the tracks ahead of us, and there is nothing you can do to prevent her demise. I paid the driver and his crew to jump from their engine at Bekesbourne, I was to follow them shortly afterwards, but now it looks as if I shall be travelling to another place.”

You will indeed, thought Peregrine, his mind racing, straight to hell you devil! And before the evil doctor had drawn his last breath Peregrine was up and running towards the front of the train. Clashed in his hand was Crick’s carpet bag, which he knew was packed full of the royal booty. In his haste, Peregrine sent a waiter with a tray of brown Windsor soup flying. The viscous substance landing in the lap of a rather bemused vicar. But he did not dare stop, he had to save Petunia.

Peregrine made it as far towards the front of the train as he possibly could, but there was no connecting door to the locomotive. He would have to climb outside. Taking the butt of his revolver he slammed it into the window next to him, sending shards of glass flying. A harsh wind came blowing into the carriage. He knocked the remaining shards clear from the window, before slinging the carpet bag across his shoulder and leaning out dangerously. He was thrown backwards by a blast of cold air. Bringing his

free hand up to shield his face he could see something up ahead on the tracks. It was white and billowing in the breeze. It took him a while to work out what it was, but then the sickening realisation flooded over him. It was Petunia, in her long white flowing dress. Damn and blast it. She was a lot closer than he had expected. Even if he could reach the locomotive and find a brake, or extinguish the fire in the boiler, there was no way the thundering train would be able to stop in time. All was lost.

And then he saw it. Salvation. Up ahead lay not only the prone body of his faithful companion, but also a set of points and a lever to throw them. One nudge of the controlling lever and the train would shift on to a parallel track saving Petunia's life.

There was only one thing he could do. He raised his revolver and checked the chamber, three rounds remaining. He would have to keep a steady hand, but if only one round hit the lever it might just work. Holding the revolver with both hands he rested his finger on the trigger, shut one eye, and took aim. When the lever was in his sights he held his breath, and then squeezed the trigger: BANG, BANG...

2. Trouble brewing

...BANG. A fist slammed on to my desk for a third time.

"Harker! Harker, my boy! Rise and shine."

I opened my eyes, and then immediately shut them again, realising I had been asleep. I gradually opened first my left eye and then my right, taking in my surroundings. I was in the newsroom of the Evening Inquirer, my head resting on my notepad. Around me was the din of two-dozen clacking typewriters as busy journalists frantically recorded the day's news.

Through a rain-splattered window I could see a brown smudge of smoggy sky. Below, men in top hats and frock coats made their way along Fleet Street, with the occasional cloth-capped copy boy running alongside them.

I was at my workplace in London.

There was no train, no secret mission, and no Petunia. I had been dreaming again.

I looked up and saw Reginald Morton, news editor of the Evening Inquirer, leaning

over me. He picked up a tattered magazine from my desk and momentarily thumbed the pages.

“I see you’ve been reading the Penny Dreadful again, Harker. Nothing but a load of fanciful tosh. Next you’ll be dreaming you’re a bally hero, instead of a simple hack. Well, there’s no time for that, I can tell you. The editor wants to see you in his office right away. Come on lad, jump to it!”

I reluctantly stood up and made my way to the large mahogany door at the end of the office that bore the name:

Jabez Challock – Editor

I raised my hand to knock, but before my knuckles reached the woodwork a voice boomed from inside.

“Harker, get in here now!”

I slowly opened the door to find the familiar form of Jabez Challock sitting behind a large wooden desk. He was dressed in a garish checked suit, and a large pipe hung from his lips, blue smoke curling upwards, around his piggy face.

Challock was a larger-than-life Yorkshireman with a fearsome reputation. He was well known in Fleet Street for his outrageous manners, impressive moustache and terrible wind. He was an editor who could terrify even the bravest of chaps.

“Sit down, boy,” he grunted, pointing to a chair in front of a large mahogany desk.

“How old are you, lad?”

“Fifteen, sir,” I answered.

“Fifteen, eh. And you’ve been a reporter with us for three months?”

I nodded in reply, wondering what he was getting at. I was about to find out.

“In the past twelve weeks you’ve been late for work five times, had a scrap in the newsroom twice and even been in trouble with the police.” His chubby cheeks wobbled as he spoke. “That’s not to mention how scruffy you look, you’re like a tall bag of bones with a straw mop on top.” He paused, narrowing his angry gaze. “But the worst thing Harker, the worst thing,” he continued, “are these tall tales you keep

blithering on about. I've not had one decent bit of copy from you, lad, since you started. You're too busy chasing make-believe tales of spies, thieves and saboteurs. None of which have been true. You're living in a dream world, lad. And it won't do, it won't do at all."

I sat there silently, half expecting him to jump across the desk and hit me, but instead he opened a drawer and pulled out a wedge of papers. He looked at them with disgust.

"Just look at this nonsense. Last week alone you tried to convince me a Dowager Duchess was selling stolen diamonds from the Cape, a group of anarchist lamplighters wanted to plunge London into darkness and there was a foreign plot to lace the King's crumpets with arsenic. This is a newspaper, Harker, not a Penny Dreadful.

"By all accounts I should throw your useless backside out of this office and kick you all the way to the workhouse. But I'm not a monster, lad. I know you've had some dark days recently with the death of your parents. Sir Michelmas Harker was one of the best explorers this country has ever seen and the reports he sent back to this newspaper were second to none. You may not know this, lad, but I promised your father if anything happened to him I would look after you. So when he and your mother, Lady Octavia, went missing in Peru, the least I could do was take you on. Which is why I'm going to give you another chance, only one mind, but a chance nonetheless to show me you can actually do what I pay you for." He paused for a second and mysteriously pushed forward a dainty cup and saucer, full to the brim with steaming hot char. "Now then, my boy," he said, losing something of his angry tone, "what do you know about tea?"

"Tea, sir?" I said, perplexed.

"Yes, lad, tea," he replied, his angry tone returning. "Tell me what you know about the humble British brew."

"Well, apart from the fact I like to take mine with a dash of milk, not very much, sir," I said, stalling for time. "From what I recall it is derived from the leaf tips of a rather particular plant grown in large plantations in India, famously in Assam and Ceylon. It is hand-picked and shipped to Britain on board tea clippers in large wooden chests. Great quantities of it pass through the wharves and docks in South London every day. Traders haggle over the price with the importers, buy what they can afford and

distribute it across the nation, where it is sold in tea houses and penny bazaars to all and sundry. I would not be surprised if everyone from the lowest vagrant to His Majesty himself has at least one cup a day. In fact I would go as far as to say, after water, it is very likely the most popular beverage in the world,” I finished, rather pleased with myself.

“Indeed it is, lad. Indeed it is,” replied Challock looking worried. “Which is why the assignment I am about to send you on is of the gravest importance. This humble little cup of stewed leaves and warm water is the oil that keeps the cogs of Empire moving smoothly. If you were to deny the humble British labourer his morning cup there would be riots on the streets of every major city from here to Rangoon; and, in a few months, I believe that very tragedy is about to happen. There’s trouble brewing and no mistake.”

I chuckled at what I thought was a joke, but Challock’s face remained serious.

“This is no laughing matter, Harker. You see, during the past few weeks, the keen-eyed of us, have been noticing tea prices shooting sky-high. If they continue to rise at this rate it won’t be long before the tea pots of the British Empire are dry. Even my wife tells me we might have to stop having it delivered to our house. This will not do, Harker. It will not do at all. Which is why I am commissioning you to get to the bottom of it all. I am giving you two weeks to find out why tea prices are on the rise.”

I felt like groaning. This was not the kind of thing a young lad should be doing, worrying about the price of consumables, he should be cutting a dashing figure around town on the hunt for stories that thrilled and excited his readers. Before my disappointment could grow any deeper, Challock brought me out of my funk.

“I’ve already made a start for you, lad. You have an appointment with a tea trader called Clayton in Cutler Street in an hour, so you had better hurry.”

With that he returned to looking at some copy, studying it intently as if I was not even there. I sat for a second wondering what I should do before rising and heading to the door. But before I could leave, Challock stopped me.

“Oh, Harker. The deal is, lad, if you come back with the goods you can keep your job but if you fail, if you don’t do as you are told, and instead go off on the trail of armed villains and vagabonds, then don’t think of returning to this newspaper again. Good

day to you, Harker. Good day.”

3. Buried alive

As my cab drew up at Cutler Street, I began to feel this assignment might not be quite as dull as I was expecting. The place was teeming with life and movement and colour. Above me brown-bricked warehouses towered six storeys into the murky winter sky. From every window and opening, labourers were busy at work, shouting and bellowing to their mates, their breath hanging in the wintry sky. Bales of fine coloured silks, crates of ostrich feathers, and barrels of wine were being hauled up from the ground, by clanking iron chains, and into the belly of the brick beast, where no doubt they were being carried off to sorting halls and showrooms. On the ground, packing-cases of bananas and chests of tea were being delivered by vans and carts at an almost constant rate. Boys younger than myself were running round each crate as it arrived, checking the numbers daubed on the sides against grubby lists clasped in their hands. The whole picture reminded me of an anthill.

Stepping from the cab a bitter wind caught my overcoat. There was a touch of snow in the air, and I watched as it fell into the dimpled leather of my brogues. Pulling my collar up I stepped into the throng of people. Wherever there was space, men had lit glowing briars, and those taking a break were gathered around them drinking tea from chipped enamel mugs and smoking dog-eared cigarettes.

I examined the name and address I had been given for my appointment. By the look of things I was to meet someone by the name of Sir Magnus Clayton in an office on the fifth floor of a crumbling building known as the Old Bengal Warehouse. With a little help from an errand boy I made my way to the entrance. It lay in a dark cobbled road behind the main row of warehouses. A couple of flickering gas lamps were already alight. Thank goodness they were. Despite being the middle of the day, the sun was hidden behind a thick screen of smog and cloud, and without their guiding lights I would have been stumbling over my own feet. For some reason I suddenly felt quite afraid. The situation was not made any more appealing by the appearance of a funeral hearse parked up ahead. Two black horses, with black feathered plumes attached to their foreheads, stood in front of a black windowless carriage. On the kerb next to the hearse was the unmistakable shape of a coffin. A shudder ran down my spine.

I went to move off, but my curiosity stopped me. Why would someone be collecting a

coffin from a dock warehouse? Why had they simply discarded it by the roadside? More importantly, why was I not already investigating? Well, there was nobody about, so now was my chance. As I walked towards the ominous box, Challock's words rang in my ears: 'If you don't do as you are told, don't think about returning to this newspaper ever again!' That may well be the case, I pondered, but just one look surely wouldn't hurt, and anyway who gives a fig about tea: coffins are much more interesting.

I quickly glanced round the street, checking the coast was clear, then made my way to the long box. Keeping in the shadows to remain unseen I knelt down to take a look. It was a most peculiar affair, shoddily made out of rough wooden planks. There were gaps between the slats and I could just see through. The faint light from a nearby gas lamp caught on something inside. Whatever was in there, it was certainly not a body. It looked almost metallic, glinting in the gloomy light. I would need a closer look. If only I could get it under the light of the gas lamp, I would have a better idea of its contents. There was only one thing for it, I would have to move the coffin. Putting both hands on the end of the casket I tried to give it a shove, but it stayed fast on the frosty kerb. I tried again, putting all my weight behind it, my legs and arms straining for all they were worth, but it refused to budge even an inch. Whatever was inside, it was extremely heavy.

I had just about made up my mind to open the thing and take a peek when I suddenly heard a noise from behind me. It was the approaching sound of shuffling feet. I had to hide, and fast. I stopped what I was doing, dropped to the floor and rolled under the carriage. It was dark beneath the hearse, dark and cold. I could feel the damp, frozen, cobbles beneath me and my nostrils were full of the pungent hay-like smell of the horses in front. I could hear the steps coming closer, and then, out of the fog and gloom appeared two sets of booted feet. There was a puffing and groaning noise, as if the mystery pair were carrying something heavy. Then their arms came into view as they lowered an object to the ground next to me. It was another coffin.

"Cor blimey, what the blast's in these caskets. I almost bust a lung carting 'em down them stairs," said a voice. It was high-pitched and nasal, but there was something chilling and vicious about it.

"Never you mind, boy," replied a completely different voice. This one deep and throaty, like the growl of an untamed beast. "You know the rules. No looking in the

boxes, and no asking questions, unless you want to end up floating face down in the Thames that is." At this the pair chuckled. I heard the rasp of matches and then caught a whiff of tobacco smoke as they lit cigarettes.

"Speaking of which," said the high-pitched man. "What did happen with old Bert?"

"Well, according to the Peelers, he was just another floater. Accident at the docks they said. But between you and me, lad; it was my hands what done him in. Right round his scrawny neck." The pair laughed again. "He was off to see the boss, weren't he? Going to tell him he'd found something going on down here. Silly old duffer. What did he expect?"

The high-pitched man let out a frightened laugh.

"You wouldn't do me in, would yer?" he said nervously.

"Of course not, boy," came the reply. "As long as you don't go looking in them boxes."

There was another nervous laugh. "Now come on, we better get these shifted before anyone sees."

With that the pair threw their cigarette ends on the floor and stubbed them out under their grubby shoes. Right then, I should have been thinking of my safety, but all I could think about was the amazing scoop I was about to write. I had a confession of a murder, not to mention the mystery contents of the coffins. If only I had been paying attention. As the pair bent down to pick up the casket resting by the kerb, I suddenly caught a glimpse of a grimy face turned towards me.

"Here, who the 'ell are you?" It was the squeaky-voiced man, who was quickly joined by his companion, a grubby, chubby-faced brute missing most of his teeth.

"Well, well, well. Looks like we've got ourselves an eavesdropper," the other man chuckled. "And we know what happens to them."

Before I had time to think, a strong pair of hands gripped my ankles and yanked me towards them. Within a second I was hauled up against the carriage, my face pressed against the glossy black woodwork, my arms held firmly behind my back.

"Shall I tell you what happens to eavesdroppers, lad?" the deep-voiced man continued.

"You won't if you know what's good for you," I spat, trying to keep up a sense of bravado. My captor let out a horrid laugh.

"You've got spirit, boy, but that won't help yer," he chuckled. "Not when you're buried alive." I heard him turn to the other man. "Fetch me a coffin and be quick about it."

No matter how hard I struggled I couldn't escape. I struggled and squirmed, but the scoundrels had me gripped tightly. Behind me I heard a scraping and clattering noise. Then all of a sudden I was thrown backwards and shoved to the floor. At first I didn't realise what had happened, but then it dawned on me, I had been shoved into one of the wooden boxes. I just caught a glimpse of two evil faces grinning above me, before a rough wooden lid was thrown on top of me. I tried to kick out, and force my way from the coffin, but it was no good, they were nailing it shut.

"Right, lad, we're off, we got business to mind, but we'll be back for you later," said the deep-voiced man. "Don't you go running off now," he laughed. "We wants to have words with you, before we send you six feet under."

With that I heard the trundle of the undertaker's carriage pulling away from the kerb. Then I was alone. This was not good. This was not good at all. I was trapped fast in the coffin. It was so small I could hardly move, my arms were held close to my sides, and the lid was a hair's breadth from my nose. There was no escape. My only way out would be to get help. I shouted out in panic, bellowing and bleating until my throat was raw but my calls were in vain. Why had I not paid attention to Challock? Why had I not simply followed his instructions to do as I was told? They say curiosity killed the cat. Well it looked like it was about to finish me off too.

After half-an-hour of sweating and panicking I heard the trundle of the undertaker's carriage returning. This would be my only chance to get free. If they so much as lifted the lid for a second, I would kick out with all my strength and try to wrestle free from the coffin.

I heard the carriage stop and then a pair of footsteps. I readied myself for action. The footsteps came closer and closer, until they were right beside me. Then, thank God, I heard a scraping and a knocking and the lid was torn from the coffin. I kicked out with all my might, and looking up saw the body of a man go flying. I was free. I jumped to my feet and flew at my attacker, grabbing him round the throat. It was only

then I realised the man who had opened the coffin was not one of my attackers. Looking back at me was a vision from my past. At first I didn't quite recognise him. His face had aged since we had last met, but how could I not remember that beaming smile and those piercing eyes? It was unmistakably Archie Dearlove.

PETRONELLA AND THE JANJILONS – FANTASY FOR GIRLS

This book is suitable for ages 8 to 14 according to reading ability

The Janjilons are not what they seem. They look like a type of monkey but they are really children. How did they turn into Janjilons? And could it happen to anyone?

Behind this mystery is someone evil, Judge Ormerod who wants to be the next Duke of Westshire. With the help of three weird sisters, he has to rid the land of clever children from being an obstacle to him. The Janjilons work for him as the three sisters mete out punishment and keep them locked up.

Petronella starts to look into these strange happenings. But time is running out because when the Judge no longer needs the Janjilons, they will be destroyed.

Reviews

“Loved this book – engaged with it straight away - especially liked Betty. Delightful book. Well recommended.”

Lorraine Baker, Bookseller, Wales

“... a great book for reluctant readers ... A good fantasy read with good vs. evil”

Ann Klausing, Bookseller, Books-a-Million, USA

“There are three witches, a hidden school and a lot of evil in this story. You’ll meet characters that will surprise you and the ending is great.

Ms. Bentley does not write boring books. I can see a young one reading this book more than once. Maybe they can even write a story of their own...”

Jo Ann Hakola, The Book Faerie, Bookseller, USA

“You’ll have to jump on this fast moving fairy tale thriller to find out what happens...”

Bill Baker, Teacher, USA

“...the story was well done, Petronella a good strong female lead.

“A fun and exciting tale of mischief and the resulting troubles, of problem solving and

the outcome of working toward a goal.”

Linda Barrett, Bookseller, USA

“When I finished reading *Petronella and the Janjilons*, the first thing that came into my mind was, ‘I need to read more Nancy Drew.’ I kind of felt that it’s somehow like Nancy Drew.

“I like it because its contents are really action-packed. The writing is really alive and the author somehow connected with me through her writing.

“If you want a quick and light fantasy mystery read, then maybe you could try reading this.”

Teenage reviewer, Philippines

“*Petronella and Edmundus Chewnik* live in their Manor House in Fort Willow. Their friend, the Duke of Westshire, a fair and heir-less man, has just died. Before going, he left explicit instructions as to how the next Duke will be chosen. The problem is, one of his councillors (as the British spell it) wants that dukedom more than he can fathom. That’s when the trouble starts.

“It seems that the boys of Fort Willow are all being offered free places at a nearby boarding school. Most parents here can’t afford it, so they jump at the chance to educate their sons at a prestigious school. But Soloman, the local orphan, doesn’t think anything good is going on. So he enlists the help of *Petronella* to see if she can sort things out. But before she can get started, Soloman is discovered in the woods by three witchy types and the judge who was responsible for sending the boys off to school. Unfortunately, they see him, and he soon learns of their nefarious plans.

“A cute story, this book is the second in the series starring *Petronella*. Part Grimm Brothers, part Enid Blyton and part Tarzan, it’s sure to please kids looking for adventure.”

Audrey Wilkerson, Reviewer, USA

Preview of *Petronella and the Janjilons*, by Cheryl Bentley ISBN 9781907230608 (print), 9781907230585 (epub)

CHAPTER 1

One evening Petronella's big black cat, Maalox, was happily purring on the mat in front of the fireplace when the family's peace was broken in the very middle of Petronella having tea with her husband, Edmundus. A frenzied knocking pounded on the front door. Petronella looked through the window to see who it was. Soloman, the local orphan, was standing there beating his fists on their heavy oak door.

"It's Soloman Brix," Petronella said. She turned to Edmundus with a worried face. "It seems he's in some sort of distress."

"Don't worry. I'll go," Edmundus said.

When Edmundus had only opened the door a little, he could already see that Petronella was right. Soloman was definitely in a bad state.

"What is it?" Edmundus asked. "Come in! Come in!" Edmundus took Soloman by the arm and gently led him to one of their cushion armchairs. "Do sit down. Now take a minute or two to calm yourself. I'll get you a nice cup of tea and one of Petronella's delicious cup cakes."

Soloman sat shivering in the armchair. Maalox got up and rubbed against Soloman's legs as if to comfort him. Both Petronella and Edmundus sat quietly and waited for Soloman to drink at least some of his tea and to calm down a little.

Petronella said: "Come, Soloman, do tell us what's the matter."

"There's something strange happening in the village," Soloman began. "Young boys of my age, I'm twelve, are disappearing. A few of my friends have gone missing and I have no idea where they are. And now my friend Adrian Simnel has gone, too."

"Well, surely their parents know where they are? Otherwise they'd have gone out to look for them. They'd have told the police or come to see Edmundus or..." Petronella said.

Soloman was too worked up to let her finish. "No, no, you don't understand. Their parents think they are at a boarding school."

"But, they ARE at boarding school," Edmundus answered. "Only the other day I was speaking to Mrs Simnel and she was telling me how happy she was that her son, Adrian, had been accepted at the Janjilon Education Centre for Boys. An extremely

good school in her view. They're quite strict there, she was saying. They won't let boys go home whenever they like."

"Yes, but, you see, I think there's something very strange about this school. I've tried to find out where the place is and no-one seems to know where it is exactly. Somewhere on the other side of the forest, they all say. I know the forest like the back of my hand, I go there nearly every day, I've looked for the school and can't find it."

"Well, the forest is huge. There are more things in that forest than we can imagine," Petronella said. "I've never been there myself. Though I used to live in the woods in Charis Cottage, I didn't dare venture into the forest beyond."

"It's true, the forest is enormous, and I agree that I may not have seen it all. But how come boys who go to the Janjilon Education Centre are never seen again?"

"Mrs Simnel was telling me that visits are not allowed. The reason being that if the boys see their friends or families again they might want to go back home. She thought that Adrian was quite wayward and needed some stiff education," Edmundus said.

"No, I'm sure that something horrible is happening. Boys can't just go off and not be heard of again," Soloman said firmly.

Edmundus was sure that Soloman was worrying without reason. He had worked himself up into such a frenzy for nothing. Petronella, on the other hand, thought that it was a little odd. Whatever the truth was, it would be worth looking into this, to find out what had really happened. After all, it wouldn't hurt to know where these boys were. Would it?

"We could try and find out," Petronella said to Soloman.

"Would you? Would you really? So you do believe me?" Soloman was happy that someone had taken him seriously.

"I don't know what to believe," Petronella said. "I like to keep an open mind. And I like to see clearly. So I think we should look into this if only to put your mind at rest."

"Haven't you been approached by the school?" Edmundus asked Soloman.

"No, sir. Judge Ormerod has never asked me if I'd like to go. Maybe he doesn't know about me. He usually persuades parents to send their boys there, but mine are dead."

“Judge Ormerod has done a lot for the children of Fort Willow and for the county of Westshire. As Education Councillor of Westshire he has taken his job seriously and created such a good school for Westshire – his home county. It has been one of the county’s finest achievements. Do you mean to say we are not to trust Judge Ormerod?” Edmundus asked Petronella.

“No, I’m not saying that. I’m just saying that Soloman is worried and we should help him get these thoughts out of his head. I’m sure there is nothing wrong about all this.”

“I think this is dangerous, Petronella,” Edmundus said. “Judge Ormerod is not a man to be messed with. You don’t know how powerful he is.”

“Do you realise what you have just said, Edmundus?” Petronella asked. “You have just said that Judge Ormerod is a man who frightens others. A clever man with a difficult character, and a quick temper, I’ve heard.”

“He calls on families telling them how, when their boys grow up, they’ll be able to get good jobs working for the government, or in banks, and so on, instead of having to live the hard life of woodcutters, like most men here today,” Soloman said.

“I know Judge Ormerod gives some people the jitters, but he is an upright man, I’m sure of that,” Edmundus said.

“I’m not so sure,” Petronella said to herself, under her breath. Then she said loudly: “There’s no harm in clearing this up. Judge Ormerod does not need to know that we are investigating this, does he?” Petronella asked, turning to Soloman.

“Thank you so much, Petronella,” Soloman said. “I’m so happy that you are taking me seriously. I am worried about Adrian. He is my best friend. Told me lots of times that he would not go off to the Janjilon Education Centre whatever his parents said, but they sent him there all the same.”

“I’ve heard that Judge Ormerod is a fascinating and persuasive man. Maybe Adrian’s parents were taken in by him...”

“Petronella!” Edmundus interrupted her. “It’s you who should realise what you’re saying. You’re saying that Judge Ormerod is somehow involved in taking boys away from their families and hiding them away. You’re saying he’s dishonest.”

Petronella and Edmundus had never argued before. He was such a good man that he never thought other people could be horrible. Petronella turned to Soloman and said: "I will come and see you one day soon and we can talk about this."

Soloman was happy with that. He left to go back to his home where he lived on his own.

CHAPTER 2

Later that evening Petronella and Edmundus heard the sad news that Duke Merrick had died. He had been ill for some time, so the news was not altogether unexpected. He had died without leaving a son or daughter to take his place. Duke Merrick had issued an order that after his death, whoever found his Golden Shield, with his lion's head emblem on it, could become Duke of Westshire. Notices were nailed to trees around the county showing the Golden Shield with under it the words:

Whosoever findeth my Golden Shield with Lion's Head,

Shall be the rightful Duke of Westshire in my stead.

Clue: Buried in the forest amongst stones and worms

you shall find it.

And it was duly signed: "The Right Honourable Alfred Charles Merrick, the Seventh Duke of Westshire."

Duke Merrick had hidden the Golden Shield in a place so vast that it would be nearly impossible to find. Until the Golden Shield was found, Westshire would be ruled by the group of councillors who had helped Duke Merrick during his rule – this included the dreaded Judge Ormerod.

After Duke Merrick's solemn funeral, most of the people of Westshire set off in search of the Golden Shield. Some people hunted in groups and wandered off in threes and fours to look for this precious relic. The forest seemed never-ending. Some said that Duke Merrick hid it up on the mountain. Others thought the Golden Shield was buried somewhere on flat land. But nobody knew for certain, so the search parties could be seen roaming all over Westshire hoping to stumble across the Shield.

Soloman had, of course, also heard the news. Everyone in Fort Willow, and in the

whole of Westshire, was talking about this. Soloman was an only child and his parents had had high hopes for him. He'd had a very happy childhood up to the age of five. But one night his parents died in a coach-and-horses accident while on their way back from a ball. The horses had been frightened by something standing in its way, right in the middle of the road in front of them. Some kind of weird animal. So the coachman pulled the reins suddenly causing the coach to tip over and tumble down into the valley beneath them.

For the next six years, Soloman lived with his grandmother and when she too died, he went on living in her house on his own. She had left him some money, in a pot on the mantelpiece, but it was slowly running out. Luckily, Soloman could play the violin very well so he made some money by playing sweet music on street corners. People who knew of his plight would give generously.

For the rest of the time, he'd go walking around, taking his books with him. All the books he read were adventure stories, mostly about pirates. He'd imagine that he was a sea-captain attacked by pirates but with his skill and bravery, he was able to save his crew and the ship's cargo. He would sit and read wherever he found a pleasant place. Sometimes on slopes, other times near the river, and when it was raining he would find shelter and peace in a derelict house or a church.

But on this particular day he was strolling through the forest. When his feet started aching he sat down and propped himself up against the trunk of a tree. Day dreaming about adventures, while squinting through the trees, Soloman thought he saw a hut. Yes, it was some kind of rickety wooden construction. Maybe it belonged to a woodcutter – a place for keeping his tools. He decided to go and take a look. Peeping in through its one-and-only window, Soloman saw that it certainly was no tool shed.

There were two people in the hut. A wrinkled old woman in a ragged black dress and a finely dressed gentleman, in an ermine cloak. Soloman pushed the window open a crack to hear what they were saying.

"What can I do for you, Judge Ormerod?" said the old woman sitting cross-legged on the straw floor of what seemed to be her hut.

"Look here, you old hag, you know very well why I'm here. Why else would people come to visit you? Only one thing. And one only. I want my fortune told."

“Aha, it will cost you a pretty penny, so it will,” she said in a spiteful little voice. “Especially as you are a rich man. Every one knows you. Councillor to our Duke Merrick – and always scheming to take his place when he was alive. Backed up by that wicked wife of yours. Up to no good, so you are.”

“Gesuela, how dare you talk to a Judge like that?! Do you not realise I can have you and your two weird sisters thrown into jail and whipped daily? I am one of the councillors of the government, soon to be Duke of Westshire, if you will help me.”

“You wouldn’t harm us. Our supernatural powers can get the better of you any day, Judge Muck. That’s what you should be called.”

“Make haste, old hag; I haven’t got all day what with my important duties and those servants of mine to keep in line. They all stop working when I’m away from my home. Lazy lot.”

“You work those people to the bone for very little reward. You are a true tyrant,” she said.

“Enough of that, woman. Stop it right this minute, I say. Immediately. I did not come here to hear your opinions about me. When will you predict my future?”

“I can tell you your fortune tonight. Predictions work far better under a full moon,” she said.

“That cannot be. I cannot wait for a moment longer. We need to get on with it. Where can I sit?”

“On the straw on the floor. Where else?”

Judge Ormerod looked around him. Most of the straw was glued together by mud. He took his ermine cloak off and threw it down on the spot that looked cleanest. Tossing back his long black hair, he sat on the lining of his cloak.

“You must cross your legs,” Gesuela said.

“I can’t. Have you seen the size of the stirrups on my boots?” he asked.

“Then you’ll have to take them off. It won’t work unless you follow my orders.”

He did as he was told. This witch was about to do him a favour so he didn’t want to

push his luck too far.

When she saw that he was in the right position, she started:

“Gismonda! Gasmina!” she called out loud for her younger twin sisters to come. Soloman went and hid behind a tree as he saw two horrid-looking creatures clumsily stomping up the pathway to the house. But they were not identical. Gasmina had a kinder face.

“Gismonda! Gasmina!” Gesuelda angrily called even louder than before.

Judge Ormerod looked at Gesuelda in disgust. ...then Judge Ormerod got the fright of his life. Two of the ugliest women he had ever set his eyes on appeared at the doorway of the hut. He thought they must have been at least a hundred years old each. He’d never want to reach that age, if it meant looking anything like that. But he was only thirty, and he had a lot of problems right now, without thinking so far ahead.

“Twins, where have you two been? Frolicking in the forest, I suspect,” Gesuelda said to her weird sisters.

“No, we were in the forest but we weren’t frolicking, I promise, dear sister,” said Gismonda, crossing her heart. “No, no frolicking,” Gasmina repeated.

“Cross your heart, Gasmina,” Gesuelda ordered.

Gasmina nervously did as she was told.

“Then, what WERE you doing?”

“Killing wild pigs,” the two chimed together.

Judge Ormerod felt sick.

“Well, that’s alright, then,” Gesuelda said, relieved. “But, you two must stop that carry-on immediately. Go back into the forest and bring me logs. They must be:

one part: twisted pine wood

three parts: fungi-ridden willow

and three parts: diseased red maple.

Now, off you go, both of you and be quick about it.”

Soloman moved to the other side of the tree trunk so as not to be seen by the wild sisters who, by this time, were running in the other direction shouting at the top of their voices.

Judge Ormerod lowered his head. His earrings jangled.

“Sit up straight and be still,” Gesuelda ordered.

Gesuelda suddenly sprinted up to her feet and, as quick as lightning, she grabbed the handle at the end of a long black chain, hanging from the ceiling, with both her hands – pulling down on it with all her weight, until a big badly-blackened cauldron was lowered to exactly 13.7 inches from the ground. She let go of the chain. It swung to-and-fro creaking as it went, hitting Judge Ormerod squarely on the nose with its first swing.

“Ouch, be careful woman. You hurt me,” Judge Ormerod said.

“Oh, stop being such a baby. What is it you want to know?” she asked.

“My only aim in life is to be Duke of Westshire. That’s what I’ve lived for. Of course, you know I was Councillor of Education in Duke Merrick’s government. What young people need is good schooling. They should be taught discipline, good manners and how to respect their elders... The Janjilon Education Centre was the best idea I ever came up with... we all know about that, don’t we?” he asked Gesuelda while sniggering.

“This is no time to talk about The Janjilon Education Centre. Come on, get to the point. Tell me exactly why you’re here,” she said sternly.

“My wife wants me to be Duke of Westshire. Then, of course, she’ll be a Duchess. She wants this as much as I do. I have got to find that Golden Shield. Do you understand? I want to ask you if I will ever be Duke of Westshire. Can you tell me that?”

“Oh, it will take the most potent recipe I have, so it will. I must get my recipe book out and set the ingredients out before my sisters come back.” She looked out into the forest through the hut’s doorway, and saw something moving in the shade of the trees. It looked like a person.

“Just a moment,” Gesuelda whispered to Judge Ormerod, “I need to go out into the forest a moment. I think someone is spying on us.”

Gesuelda was careful to creep quietly around the hut then through some trees – until she was standing right behind Soloman. She tapped him on the shoulder and said: “So, what are you doing here, may I ask? You wouldn’t be spying on me, would you, young man?”

“Oh, no, no, I’ve been walking around the forest and I stopped to have a rest. Really, that’s all I was doing!”

“Oh, yes! So you go for walkies into the heart of this dark forest knowing it will be dusk before you can get back home. Who do you think you’re fooling? Do not, whatever you do, take me for a stupid person. Get in my hut at once! You’re nothing but a wicked young man. Get in there and don’t argue, if you ever want to see your mother again.”

“But I don’t have a mother,” he said, “she’s dead.”

Gesuelda did not feel sorry for him one bit. So if Soloman was looking to soften her heart, he could stop it at once. That idea would never work with her.

“Dead? What about your father?” she asked.

“He’s dead, too. And my grandmother, she’s dead...”

“So you’re all alone in the world, are you?” Gesuelda said to herself, more than to Soloman. “Just sit down and I’ll deal with you later,” she said.

Soloman looked around him. The hut was not very big. There was a three-tier bunk-bed in the corner and not much else, except for this big filthy black cauldron in the middle hanging from the roof, some crooked shelves, with dirty jars and bottles and boxes lined up on them, and another box on the floor.

“Come on, boy, sit yourself down and cross your legs,” Gesuelda was getting impatient. She made it quite clear that she was boss in the hut.

Soloman did as he was told and looked at the man who was already sitting there, staring at the cauldron. The boy liked adventures in books but not real ones like these, where he was in serious danger. Another sure thing was that he didn’t like the look of

this man. Soloman was intimidated by him because he was so well dressed. Looking down at himself, in comparison, Soloman felt like a real tramp. But, Soloman didn't seem to have much of a choice. He had to sit there and do what he was told and be part of the strange goings-on in this spooky hut.

What was he to do? Nobody was going to miss him at home. Nobody would come looking for him. Gesuelda knew that just as much as Soloman did.

"So, where was I?" Gesuelda said, "Ah! Yes, my recipe book." She fumbled through a few dirty sheets in a box. "Ah, here it is: The Almighty Smoke Recipe." She looked at the list and got a few jars and boxes down from the crooked shelves around her.

"A little brook water to boil it all in," she said as she poured it out of a filthy jar into the cauldron. She called out the ingredients while getting them from different shaped jars and bottles, all dirty and cracked, as she threw them into the cauldron:

"Three eyes of newts.

A third of a rat's tail.

Seven fleas from my sisters' hair.

3.7 cubes of a mouldy blackcurrant jelly.

Thirteen stitches from the festered wound of a witch's leg.

Thirty bristles of a wild pig."

This took her rather a long time to count out. Judge Ormerod and Soloman looked on hardly believing their eyes and ears. Judge Ormerod, unlike Soloman, was quite happy to go through this. The result would be worth it. These old hags were never wrong. And he would give them all he had if only they'd help him to become the most powerful man in Westshire, and keep his wife quiet as well.

"Three dried seven-legged spiders and seven clippings from my toe nails. That should do the trick," she said, all pleased with herself.

Her sisters appeared just in time. "Here you are, dear sister," Gasmina said, "here are the logs you asked for."

"Perfect," Gesuelda said, complimenting her sisters for once, instead of telling them

off.

Placing the logs under the cauldron, Gesuelda asked her twin sisters to burp into the cauldron before she set a match to the wood. "Perfect," said Gesuelda, "now just breathe on the wood to kindle the fire up properly."

The fire was soon raging and the liquid boiled while the three sisters chanted: "Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble" for three minutes and 33 seconds. They spat on the fire to tone it down a little when it flared up.

"Gasmina," said Gesuelda, "go and get the mug. And you," she said turning to Gismonda, "go and get the big wooden ladle." Gesuelda passed the disgusting liquid to Judge Ormerod, stirring it three-and-a-half times, and saying "Come on, man, drink up. I need to tell you your future."

Judge Ormerod held his nose and drank it down feeling quite queasy but knowing all along that it was for his own good.

Soloman felt sick just by watching him drinking.

"Right, we can start," said Gesuelda. "Look into the steam rising out of the cauldron and you will see some images of your future while I talk you through it."

"And you," she said, turning to Soloman, "you will go outside along with my sisters and wait there until I have time to deal with you. You horrid little man."

PETRONELLA & THE TROGOT – FOR AGES 10+

Petronella moves to Charis Cottage hidden in the thick dark woods at the bottom of a track on the outskirts of Fort Willow. Everything is perfect. Except for one thing. Since she moved an enormous black tree has appeared in her back garden in the shape of a giant with a big black circle on the ground under it. Petronella finds out it is a deep pit and is terrified to go near its ridge. But one night...

How is the tree linked to

- the strange night-time visits by the Hooded Horseman?
- the boy ghost, Percy, she finds in her bed one night?
- and the invasion of ghosts of the ancient Strincas population all over Fort Willow?

Reviews

“Kids will like this. Girls will like it for romance and boys will like it for the scare factor.”

Ann Klausing, Bookseller for Books-A-Million

“Full of ghosts and ghoulies, this is an imaginative tale.”

Bertrams Book Wholesalers

“This is a cross between fantasy, horror and mythology. It reads like a fairy tale and I liked it.

“Petronella and her cat are living in her cottage and doing well without the other villagers. Being a bit odd, she has a snail garden. And, one day, she notices a big black tree that she can’t recall having been there before. She doesn’t know it’s going to play an important part in her life.

“Her cat is the one that starts it all. He digs up a skull and some bones and takes them home with him. When the villagers find some other bones in the same vicinity, they dig them up, too. They think they’ve found a missing family and that Petronella is the killer. When the bones come back to life and they find themselves confronted with

people who died long, long ago, the villagers get concerned. Especially since the murdered peasants are reclaiming their homes and land...

"The Hooded Horseman (another peasant from the past) visits Petronella and tells her that she is the chosen one and has a quest to do to help the peasants and right the wrongs of the land and people long dead. Petronella is willing, even if it means visiting the equivalent of hell.

"The author does a nice job of writing a tale that is unique and interesting to read. I couldn't stop reading until I found out how it all ended. I bet you won't be able to either.

"Happy reading."

Jo Ann Hakola, Bookseller, USA

"I loved this book. The plot was unique to me and the creatures were amazing, there is no need for illustrations as the description of the characters is so good that they leap into your imagination in picture form.

"This book has mild horror, adventure, and morality which all work so well together. The main character – Petronella – becomes a much loved focus of the book and the change in the village is masterfully worked. Some children may find the old English speech of some of the characters hard to adjust to but I am sure that they will get there in the end. This does make distinction between the modern time people and the ancient characters much easier.

"I would be delighted to read more by this author as I found this book totally enthralling and give it a star rating of 5/5 – I loved it."

Adele Symonds, Reviewer, UK

"This was presented as a supernatural chiller and I must admit...it was a fantastic and unique read for MG and YA readers.

"I do think that the author showed wonderful imagination in creating this world and these characters."

Jolene Haley, Librarian, USA

"Petronella & the Trogot is introduced as a supernatural chiller. People who lived almost 1,200 years ago, members of the Strincas civilization, start appearing and living in modern day Fort Willow. Needless to say the Strincas resurrection scares (off) many modern day citizens. If that were not enough, Bentley adds a hooded horseman (think Legend of Sleepy Hollow) and a black, evil monster tree in Petronella's back yard.

"In Part 1 one you get to know Petronella – our protagonist, modern day Fort Willow inhabitants, the Strincas, and the evil Lord Fortesque. In Part 2 Petronella and Percy, a Strinca, investigate the tree and find themselves on a journey. Their journey is similar to Dante's Inferno with a modern twist...

"Let me put my teacher hat on for a minute...I think this novel would be a good companion to students reading Dante's Inferno. As much as I enjoy the Inferno, a lot of time must be spent on background information. Who are all these people in Dante's hell? What did they do? Why did he punish them in this particular way? In Petronella & the Trogot, you know who all the offenders are. I enjoyed reading the novel."

Rebecca Wallace, Educator, USA

"I enjoyed reading Petronella & The Trogot; it was a chilling tale however I wasn't fully hooked until the second part... I would liken the second part, Petronella's journey into hell and investigation of an evil, monstrous tree in her backyard to a miniature version of Dante's Inferno. Because Dante's The Divine Comedy especially The Inferno is one of my favorite pieces of literature I was hooked immediately. It was almost in the same structure as the inferno as well with various 'sinners' having punishments that put a cruel twist on their crime. I also really liked Bentley's creative use of language, some of the characters, ex. Strincas, had a cool old-Englshy way of speaking.

"So overall this is a good read that I recommend especially for those who have a fond spot for The Inferno. It has spooky creatures, adventure, and some romance."

Patrice Caldwell, Reviewer, USA

"Petronella and The Trogot is a slightly creepy, and enchanting book. Cheryl Bentley created this very interesting and original storyline for this book. This book is a twist between supernatural and urban fantasy.

“The people of Fort Willow hate Petronella, who is slightly green, walks around bare foot, and her house is in front of a giant mysterious tree. One day Petronella’s cat digs up a skull, and that day will change Fort Willow forever. After the cat digs up the skull then the skull’s torso it brings to Petronella’s house, it brings the ghost of the Hooded Horseman. In the field where the cat dug up the skull torso, more skeletons were found and every skeleton put back together brought that person back to life. These people are the Ancient Strincas, and Petronella is the Chosen One who decides what happens to them.

“Petronella was a fun and interesting person to read about. She was really loving and caring. Yes, she has a rough outside but on the inside she is a generally caring person. The Strincas were really interesting and fun to read about also...

“For me this book was not that scary, it was thrillingly fun to read. The storyline grabs you and traps you in it for an action packed ride.

“I really liked this book. Cheryl Bentley did a beautiful job on this book. Petronella and The Trogot is a riveting and action packed novel. I recommend this book for any one looking for a thrilling but fun read.”

Brittan Hardy, Reviewer

“Petronella, a woman who is described as ugly, moves into a village, Fort Willow. But all is not well – Strincas, the village’s inhabitants from thousands of years ago are waking up and moving in to the village and a hooded horseman tells Petronella she is the chosen one, the one that will rescue his people from the Trogot, a large tree in her garden that leads into a sort of hell/eternal punishment. Petronella, and a strincas boy Percy have to navigate their way through the Trogot to save the Strincas...

“I did enjoy Part 2 of the book... It was soon revealed that the Strincas were brutally murdered by the Lord of the Manor when a thief hit his wife’s head. The hooded horseman gives Petronella a device that is able to control the Strincas and a black box that will save her but only seven times. He also tells her she is the chosen one, although he doesn’t explain what that means. Now we come to the titular Trogot, the massive black tree in Petronella’s garden, which is a gate to hell. Petronella and Percy (a Strincas boy that used to live in Petronella’s house) venture into the Trogot to look for Percy’s parents, who have been trapped there.

"I have to say, the Trogot journey was my favourite bit of the book. The ideas of punishment and the way that Cheryl Bentley presented the punishment and the guardians were very interesting ideas – I just wish they were a little more developed.

"...I did find myself chuckling at some of the funnier lines."

Laura Noakes, Reviewer, UK

Preview of *Petronella and the Trogot*, by Cheryl Bentley ISBN 9781907230455 (print), 9781907230479 (epub)

Chapter 1

Petronella Chewnik had just moved to the outskirts of a pretty little village in the middle of the rolling downs of Westshire. She had bought a thatched cottage in Westshire's thick dark woods hidden at the bottom of a woodland track. It was simply the most lovely place that anyone could ever live in. Except for one thing. Behind the cottage stood an enormous black tree. It towered above all the others in the woods. When she'd bought Charis Cottage, she hadn't noticed this monster of a tree. The thought that the tree had appeared after she'd moved in kept racing round in her mind.

But how could a huge beast like that have grown in such a short space of time?

She knew it was silly. She must be seeing things. But that black tree just looked so much like a hairy giant – one with thick branches, growing downwards towards the ground, looking like drooping arms. The trunk split in two at the bottom, like two sturdy legs. The treetop was in the shape of a wild head of straggly hair.

Black leaves grew on the black branches. And, when it rained, black water dripped down and had formed a big circle on the ground around the tree. It was so black that Petronella thought it must be a hole – like a well – deep and dark. And the tree stood right in the middle of this pit. There must be an edge there, somewhere. If she stood near that ridge and lost her balance she would surely fall into the well and never be seen again. No, she would never go near it. Not in a million years. If she didn't go to the tree, it wouldn't come to her, would it?

'Get yourself together,' she told herself. 'Loneliness can do strange things to people's minds. When you haven't got anyone to talk to, you think too much.' Her cat, Maalox,

was her only company. A VERY big black tomcat with shiny green eyes that glowed in the dark, and a strange white patch on its breast, in the shape of a shield. He had come with Charis Cottage. Already behind her front door mewing his head off on the wind-swept night she'd moved in. He had a name-plate tied to his neck: Maalox. No address, no owner's name. Being a kind soul, she let him stay. Sometimes she spoke to him. But it was mostly her and her thoughts. Thoughts that sometimes got very weird indeed.

At last, she believed she'd found some peace. She'd been forced to move from one place to another, time and again, by cruel remarks shouted at her in the streets. These were usually about how ugly or weird she was. And nasty boys and girls played tricks on her out of spite. This hidden cottage, away from all the horrible people she'd known, was perfect.

As far as looks went, she was not exactly a front-cover face for a glossy fashion magazine. A strange health condition didn't help. Her liver did not work properly and this coloured her skin a light shade of green. Her nose was on the big side, with a hump in it about half-way down. Her teeth were uneven and yellowish. One of them had grown a bit outwards and upwards so it could still be seen when she closed her mouth.

When she went out she usually wore a black hat, thrown at her by a someone who'd said it would suit her because she looked like a witch. She would push her long black hair up into this hat to look neat.

But she did have beautiful brilliant-blue and lively eyes.

Chapter 2

Summer had soon come around and Petronella decided to go to Fort Willow's village ball. She knew that, as usual, when she went to parties she would sit on her own. What a lonely soul. She had to make the effort, though, because she hadn't given up looking for a husband. And this summer party was a brilliant chance. More than anything in the world she wanted a child. A little boy or girl to love and look after. But no man would marry her. Stop daydreaming, Petronella, it'll never happen.

In Fort Willow, all the lamp-posts had been decorated with coloured balloons for this big event. Pretty red and green party lights had been hung up by shopkeepers along the main roads leading to the white pavilion marquee, creating an exciting

atmosphere. And, at the entrance of the marquee were festoons and sprays of roses.

Petronella was getting herself ready for that special evening when she would meet the people of Fort Willow for the first time after hiding away in the woods so long. She powdered her face and carefully outlined her lips with bright green lipstick. Then she bent over to pull on her best army camouflage boots with steel safety toes. Usually, she went barefoot, but for parties she always wore her army boots. She threw her silver glittery shawl over her shoulders: now she was ready to go. Through the woods she stomped, then down the High Street to the field. This field, like many others around the village, belonged to the self-important pudding-faced and pot-bellied Farmer Giles, the Mayor of Fort Willow.

Petronella hadn't noticed that Maalox had been following her all along. So big he was that, from a distance, some people mistook him for a small dog. A group of boys along the roadside started throwing stones at Maalox. The cat ran towards them, snarled at them and showed them his sharp claws. The more the boys looked at Maalox, the bigger he seemed to get. His body just swelled out. The boys were frightened out of their tiny little minds, quickly back tracked and took to the hills as fast as they could. Petronella recognised her cat's screeches anywhere. Twisting around, she shouted: "Maalox, go straight home and don't let me tell you that again!"

But Maalox had a mind of his own, thank you very much. Rolling his eyes downwards, in pretend obedience, he started walking in the other direction and made out he was going back home, but when Petronella wasn't looking anymore, he hid in the grocer's doorway. There he stayed until she was well out of sight, then Maalox made his way to the marquee, too.

Outside the marquee many cats of Fort Willow were gathering. Probably in search of scraps of food. Maalox had a soft spot for Belinda. The prettiest of the female cats in the village. When Maalox saw her, she was proudly striding up and down a narrow wall holding her tail straight up high. She glanced at Maalox, then turned her snobbish little head in the other direction. She wasn't going to have anything to do with him. Maalox was so disappointed that he found a space near the marquee and started clawing up the earth as fast as he could out of rage. Soon there was a little pile of soil next to the hole he'd dug up. He clawed some more, but his paw scratched against something hard. It was a smooth round object. Like a football. But as he dug

more and more around it, it became clear that it was definitely not a ball. It was a skull! Yes, a human head. Maalox gripped the jaw of the skull between his teeth and ran off home with it. Not knowing what to do with his find, he dropped it in the coal scuttle next to the fireplace in the living-room. It could stay there until he worked out what to do with it.

In the meantime, Petronella had made her entrance at the summer ball. The villagers all sniggered behind her back. Both men and women were whispering nasty remarks about her. Petronella ate a couple of cupcakes at the tea stall. Then she went up to the first single man she saw, Mr Pomshort, the local butcher, and asked: "Will you marry me?" The man had just slurped up a mouthful of beer and spurted it out all over her shawl in laughter. "You're joking, woman!" he said, "I'd rather live on a desert island on my own all my life than marry you." Then he started laughing so much that he had to hold on to his belly, wobbling about like a jelly all over the place.

Not being one to be easily put off, Petronella went to Farmer Giles and tried the same question on him: "Not until a black tree gobbles you up," he answered. How strange that he knew about the black tree. Was it the same one as hers?

Petronella suddenly let off a terribly high-pitched shriek. "I damn the lot of you," she shouted. Then she threw herself into the dance she knew best: the Bosa Nova. First her face twitched, then she started shaking her shoulders; and throwing her arms up and down all over the place while she hopped from side to side. What a clumsy show. After that, everyone in Fort Willow giggled about Petronella's dancing for weeks. Twitching around, whenever they saw her in the street, and creasing themselves in half from laughter when they were taking her off.

Petronella decided she'd stay away from them all as much as she could – nasty chicken-brained little villagers.

Chapter 3

A lot of people who have lived on their own for a long time develop some pretty weird habits. Petronella was one of those. Her hobby was hunting out snails. Other people may like putting stamps in an album but Petronella got fun out of collecting snails. She popped them in the bunker she'd make at the bottom of her garden. Along the hedgerow she had sectioned off an area and filled it with soil which she kept nice and

moist by watering it every day. She visited her snails two or three times a day to see if they were OK. Snails like coming out at night, when the soil is dark and moist. When it rained, Petronella would go out snail hunting and add to her collection. She would tread the soil barefoot in the moonlight to the sound of owls, finding snails under rocks and stuck to logs and smooth stones. She loved their slippery pale skin and the different patterns on their shells.

No human voices to spoil the pitter-patter on the quiet woods. She enjoyed watching the wet shades of green in the distance, and the fresh rain fall on everything: on the pine trees, on the ivy, on logs, on the little lake, and on her face and arms. Raindrops snaked down her skin in the same way they did off the leaves on the trees. She didn't mind that it muddied her long black skirt. It rained on her thoughts, making her feel like a real child of nature in the sad beauty that was all around her.

One night while she was doing cartwheels in the woods, she heard an eerie rustling noise and thudding of horse's hooves. She hid behind a thick tree trunk. But the horseman had seen her from a long way off and stopped. His face was hidden in a deep black hood. No way could she see who he was. In his hand, he had an old yellowy-brown note which he held out for Petronella to take. Trembling with fear, she quickly crumpled it into her pocket, and hurried back to Charis Cottage. Once she was inside and safe, she ironed out the note on the table with her hands, then looked for her glasses. She could not make it out. She tried turning the piece of paper around. When she held the note up straight, the scribble looked like the letters TCO. What did this mean?

Drawing back her net curtains a little, she found the courage to peep out into the darkness. It looked like he wasn't around. There was no more noise. Questions started spinning round in her head: What could these letters mean? Who was that man? Why had he given the note to her of all people? What was she supposed to do? She could do nothing there and then. Off to bed she went, to sleep on it. Maybe the answers would come to her the next day when she could think straight.

Chapter 4

Maalox woke up very early that particular morning. His sleeping place was on a broken armchair next to Petronella's bed. When he wanted to wake her up, he sat on her head. But, not this morning. He gave himself a quick lick clean, darted to his

saucer of milk under the spiral staircase, then went to the coal scuttle to see if the skull was still there. Yes, it was! Maalox pushed the cat-flap outwards with the top of his head, jumped out and headed towards the village in long strides. There was no traffic in the High Street except for Fred the milkman on his rounds. Mrs Bellamy, at house number 49, was already nosing behind the net curtains of her front-room window, in her dressing-gown.

Fred crept up the garden path to Mrs Bellamy's brass milk rack. He tried to deliver her milk without being seen. If she started nattering, she'd go on and on forever. Headache. But the house-proud gossip had already opened her newly-painted white door to ask Fred if he could leave a carton of fresh orange juice and a pound of butter as well as the usual milk. Her husband was the village constable and he needed a hearty breakfast before he went off on the beat. She always got breakfast ready for him with joy because she loved to get him out of the house and have the place to herself.

"No prob, Mrs B," said Fred.

"Did you see that ugly witch prancing about at the village ball? God only knows what she gets up to in that cottage of hers, in the woods there where no-one can see her. I wouldn't be surprised if she's brewing up potions and putting spells on us. Mark my words, they'll be trouble round here before long. This village isn't what it used to be."

At this time in the morning, Fred just couldn't stomach Mrs Bellamy's natter. So, as she was talking, he started creeping backwards towards his float, while nodding to her all the time. As he was doing this, Mrs Bellamy spotted Maalox sneaking by on the pavement across the road.

"And he's up to no good either," she shouted after Fred as he'd just got into the driver's seat for the great escape.

The bacon, eggs and sausages were already sizzling in the pan when her husband came downstairs. She was still obsessing about Maalox: "That woman's cat was prowling about this morning, looking as if he was up to no good."

"I wouldn't worry about it, dear," the Constable said, "it's only normal for cats to be out early."

“Not for that cat to be in the village, it isn’t! He’s up to no good, I tell you. You mark my words.”

Constable Bellamy munched his last piece of toast, washed it down with a cup of tea then flew out of the front door, saying he’d be late for work, if he didn’t hurry.

While plodding to the Police Station, he saw Maalox going into Farmer Giles’s field. The cat disappeared round the back of the marquee. When Maalox thought nobody could see him, he clawed into the brown peat in the same spot as the night before. He soon came across a neck and shoulders, and dug carefully around them to free them of the soil stuck to the bones. The torso was now completely dug up. It must have been the second part of the skeleton whose head was in the coal scuttle. The weight of these bones was too much for Maalox to carry. He went into the marquee. In the corner, near a cluttered table, was a food trolley. If Maalox got the torso into the marquee and onto the trolley, he could wheel it home. It was still early, and even the milkman had gone off to another part of the village. By turning the torso round and round and moving it forward little by little, Maalox managed to get it into the marquee. When he had pulled it up onto the lower-shelf of the trolley, he threw a table cloth over the whole lot, and pushed it back home, gripping the trolley handle in his mouth.

Maalox wheeled the bones to the snail bunker. The snails were busy feeding on leaves. He cleared them out of the way with his front paws. The torso was soon buried and the trolley hidden under some shrubs nearby. Probably, thinking that he had done a good morning’s work, Maalox went to lie on the mat in the front-door porch. The rattling of milk bottles growing louder told Maalox that Fred was bringing their milk.

Fred wagged his finger at Maalox, saying: “You wanna watch it. Don’t go getting yourself into any trouble, mate. That’s all I can say. Belinda’s not your kind, my boy. You know Blazh, that vicious stray, likes her, as well. He’ll have your whiskers for garters, if you ain’t careful.” And with that, the milkman went off back to his rounds.

Petronella was getting up. Hadn’t got a wink of sleep, tossing and turning in her bed all night. Her mind buzzing with that strange meeting she’d had the night before. Still had no idea what those letters stood for. Maalox jumped onto Petronella’s bed and snuggled up against her: “Maalox, you are such a star,” she said, as she stroked his head. She might as well get on with her everyday chores – yet the sight of the black-hooded horseman kept haunting her mind. And then there was that black monster of

a tree in her back garden. She knew the branches were never in the same place. The wind couldn't sway that strong thick wood.

The best view of that beast was from the spare bedroom window. The room where she'd piled up all the boxes, full of useless objects, when she'd moved. She didn't know why, but couldn't stop herself. She had to go and see it. So she climbed the creaking stairs, then stopped on the landing for a moment. Yes, she would go in.

Creeping into the spare room she watched from a distance, as if she was afraid of being seen by the tree. She was sure its head had turned to face Charis Cottage and that it was looking straight at her. She dropped down quickly and hid behind one of the boxes. The tree's head seemed to have stretched out towards her, as if to get a better look at her. Two branches lifted out in front of it, like arms. Its hands turned inwards. Then its hands moved towards its chest, as if to say "Come to me." There it stayed in that position for quite a while. Before dropping its arms down again.

When Petronella was sure it wouldn't move anymore, still keeping her head down, she made for the door. Once she was out on the landing, she locked up the room. She promised herself she would never go in there again. Never.

Back to her housework she went. Dusting, polishing and tidying up. She had to busy herself to keep her mind off the mysterious secrets of Charis Cottage and its woods.

Chapter 5

Wedding bells chimed merrily in the steeple of the village church as the newly married couple stepped out into a shower of rose petals. The guests followed Molly and Jake to their reception in the marquee. Everyone in Fort Willow had been invited – except Petronella, of course. But, Maalox was there, amongst the cats sniffing about in the field round the marquee. Some cats had noticed the hole in the peat. Others gathered round to find out why all the interest. Maalox kept quiet. Looking down into the soil, he saw what looked like a human hand sticking out of the peat.

The other cats jumped in and started digging, too. Soon the hand was clawed free of peat and dragged up onto the grass for all the cats to see. Then they went back and started digging some more. They dug and dug bringing out more limbs, heads and torsos, lots of them: parts of human bodies to be pieced together like a puzzle.

Two bridesmaids sneaked out of the wedding reception for a breath of air. They strolled round to the back of the marquee for a good gossip and a giggle in private. They stopped dead in their tracks. To their horror, they saw this most creepy heap of bones. Clogged with soil and grass sticking out of them. One of the bridesmaids stood there as if frozen stiff. The other rushed back into the marquee screaming in shock: "Oh, God! God! I've just seen something disgusting: skulls, skeletons, bones everywhere!" The guests all hurried out to get a look. What a sight!

"We must call the police," said one man, "this is the most gruesome thing the village has ever seen."

A woman fainted and another one was sick, right there in the field. Molly and Jake stood still in terror. How could this happen on their wedding day? On what is supposed to be the happiest day of their lives? Their wedding reception had been ruined. People started sitting round the edge of the field to watch from a distance. The best man asked the guests to go home, but nobody moved. One of them said that a family had gone missing from the village, suddenly, overnight. "Could it be them?" Voices began spreading that the bones were for sure those of the strange Phillips family, whose son Phillip was suspected of torturing animals, and whose daughter, Alice, was the most spiteful girl ever to live in Fort Willow. A woman added that it is only to be expected that outsiders bring trouble to their peaceful village:

"I always said that Phillips family was strange, didn't I? If we didn't have new people here, we wouldn't have any crime at all. Look at that weird woman who lives in the woods. She's not one of us, is she?"

A couple shook their heads in agreement: "No, she certainly is not," the husband said.

"And, have you seen that cat of hers," added the wife, "I reckon it's a cross between a cat and a dog, if you ask me. The devil's doing."

"Really!" exclaimed another listener, "I always thought that animal had the devil in him. After all, it can't be normal for a cat to be that size."

"She's so ugly she could be the devil's wife," shouted someone else.

Just about everyone had to have a say in this:

"Oh, my God! The devil's wife! You know she never goes to church on Sundays, she's

out barefoot at night and in the pouring rain looking for bugs, mushrooms, snails...”

“Gathering all sorts of weeds, berries and the like, probably boiling up potions, conjuring up evil...”

“She’s put a curse on us.”

“She put a spell on our village. She’s brought evil to our village by waking up wicked spirits.”

“Yes, don’t you all remember when she left the summer ball, she said she would put a curse on all of us...”

“She wants to spite us because Farmer Giles didn’t agree to marry her. It can’t be a coincidence that the bodies are right here in his field...”

Three of them bolted over to Constable Bellamy:

“Excuse me, officer. We wanted to warn you that there’s this weird woman living in the woods who’s really strange – you’ve got to check up on her. The Phillips family went missing just after she came to live here. She hated the two Phillips kids because they went to play near her house, and they’d hide and throw stones at her when she came out. Petronella’s her name. Petronella Chewnik.”

“Thank you,” Constable Bellamy said, “we’ll look into it. We’ll do everything we can within our power. I promise you.”

THE BOY WHO MADE IT RAIN – AGE 13+

When a school tragedy happens, you probably lay the blame on society, the Internet, TV or violent films. Not many of you think it could be the parents' or the teachers' fault, do you? But then, is it? We all have our say, spout off opinions in different directions according to our view of the world. In this novel, too, they all have their say, but who's right?

At only sixteen Clem's world is turned upside down. His father, a travelling salesman and a loser, is transferred from Eastbourne to Glasgow and with him go Clem and his passive mother. But his new sink school is rough. Clem's posh accent, love of learning, and attraction to the school beauty, Rosie, soon make him the target for McEvoy's gang of thugs whose most important ambition in their depraved lives is slashing faces.

Reviews

"innovative and insightful... I couldn't wait to devour part two"

Times Educational Supplement

"I was utterly flabbergasted... one of the most compelling novels I've ever read"

Heffers Review, Cambridge

"definitely up there with the modern classics"

What? Magazine

"Brilliant writing, brilliant structure, brilliant book"

Des Dillon, author of Me and Ma Gal

"A must-read...an innovative novel that will keep you glued to the story until you turn the last page and learn the final outcome... Thought provoking, mind stimulating and characters with individual voices that are heard loud and clear. The Boy Who Made it Rain is a must/read for everyone. Author Brian Conaghan brings to light the issue of bullying, class issues, prejudice and the difficulties teens face growing up in any society or country today."

Fran Lewis, New York Reviewer, Educator, TV chat show host and interviewer

“Told from different points of view, Brian Conaghan’s *THE BOY WHO MADE IT RAIN*, shows what happens when a boy finds himself in a strange school, the target of many other kids and as well as vicious rumors, and the resulting violence that occurs.

“This is no fantasy – kids can be vicious – just remember the names you used to call your friends, rumors you would hear, how easy it was to make someone a scapegoat. Of course bullying is not isolated to kids – we see it clearly in domestic and international politics on a grand scale.

“Brian Conaghan uses mounting suspense and an ironic ending to show us not only the consequences of violence, but its utter uselessness as well.

“*THE BOY WHO MADE IT RAIN* is a valuable, gripping read”

Bill Baker, Educator, USA

“Clem is the newcomer/English outcast at his Scottish high school. He has really only made one friend, Rosie. This doesn’t stop others from forming opinions of him and even spreading some nasty rumors.

“This book has a really interesting structure. Clem is the main character but we don’t really meet him until halfway through. Instead, we get monologues from other characters sharing their opinions/observations about Clem. Through these minor characters we begin to get a sense of Clem and we also begin to realize that something very bad may have happened. Perhaps something on a Columbine scale. The structure really adds to the feeling of foreboding. It was really extremely well done.

“I really believe this book is going to begin appearing on required reading lists for many, many English classes. I also believe the students won’t mind. The author has done an excellent job of capturing different speaking styles and voices for each of his characters. Just what a writing teacher needs for a mentor text.

“Verdict: Highly recommended

“Challenge Alert: lots of realistic cussing. Although, quite a lot of that cussing is spelled with a Scottish accent so maybe parents won’t realize it.”

Stephanie Lott, Educator, USA

“This is a brilliantly written book. I read it in one sitting, I just could not put it down.

“It is the story of Clem - a new boy who has moved from Eastbourne to Glasgow with his parents.

“It is written in a narrative style with each chapter written from a different character’s point of view. They are all writing with hindsight after a major event has occurred which the reader is left to guess about right up to the very end.

“The last section is Clem’s own narrative telling us his thoughts, feelings and actions, from finding out he is moving right through to the magnificent climax.

“This book will keep you enthralled throughout. The characters are exceptionally well described and revealed through their dialogue...”

Adele Symonds, Reviewer UK

“I will unashamedly admit that when I began reading *The Boy Who Made It Rain*, I was utterly flabbergasted. I began reading it early in the morning and I didn’t put it down until I had finished it that evening, and though it’s only 196 pages long, this is perhaps one of the most compelling novels I’ve ever read.

“The premise of the book is of the relocation of a family from Eastbourne to Glasgow, and of the stigma faced by the son as he tries to settle into the local school.

Interestingly, Conaghan initiates the novel in a series of first person interviews with several (seven in fact) characters. This automatically initiates a much stronger relationship with the text because the multiple first-person perspectives allow a great deal of empathy and understanding to develop for each character very rapidly.

“Very early on, it becomes apparent that Conaghan is building up to something, his interviews taking on the shape of statements. Each ‘statement’ is crafted to be long enough to build up the picture just a little bit more, to give just a little more away, but not enough to say with any certainty the final outcome. And this is the crux: long before you finish the first half of the novel with the character’s statements, to move onto the second half concerning the protagonist’s recollection of events, you have a horrible inkling of what’s going to happen. Grim inevitability coupled with fantastic word-craft is what makes you turn those pages, and Conaghan does not disappoint...

When you turn that last page I guarantee you will feel numb with shock.”

Heffer's review

Preview of The Boy Who Made it Rain, by Brian Conaghan ISBN9781907230196 (print), 9781907230370 (epub)

Rosie Farrell's First Impression

We met when Clem first came to our school. It was two weeks into term. He was from somewhere down in the south of England. I don't know. I'd never heard of the place. Still haven't, even though he told me about it loads of times. Sounds rubbish wherever it is though. He had a funny accent, that's why everyone sort of fancied him. Including most of the *out* guys. Cora said he had that Robbie Williams thing going on...all the guys wanted to be him and all the girls wanted to...well, you know. He didn't say much at first; just did his work and kept his head down. Bore a minute.

Yes, he was smart. Dead smart. He'd read all these things that we couldn't even pronounce, all this foreign stuff. Get a life, right? But he wasn't a big-headed bragger or anything like that. I wasn't much of a reader so I thought I was well out of his league. Not that I really wanted to be in it in the first place. I usually find all that stuff dead boring. Reading and all that.

English was his thing though; he sat down the front like a pure teacher's pet. He was into challenging them all the time. The teachers. Having all these debates about dead dull stuff. Nonsense. Boreathon, right? I thought Miss Croal flirted with him from day one. She was one of those fresh-out-of-training- college teachers. And they're all the same. They come breezing in with heads full of Hollywood films and a desire to 'make a difference.' Airheads with no clue whatsoever. To tell you the truth it was kind of embarrassing watching her make an eejit out of herself. Revelling in thinking she was this kind of fountain of knowledge. Fountain of lavvy water more like! Honestly, Miss Croal was as bright as a blackout. No, I didn't take the mickey. Not my style, I'm a passive observer. Yes, some people did. But not bullying or intimidation, or anything like that. Well, it's a bit of a red neck, but my friend Cora used to say *Miss Croal's gagging for her hole* when she started flirting and flicking the eyes to all the guys. Once she actually said it to her face, but in rhyming slang.

She said, erm, *gantin for your Nat King, Miss?* Croal would never have guessed what it meant. She was probably from the posh part of town. The West End or something.

She was like that, Cora, real brash, in your face stuff. But she was a howl.

Yes, he was different from the other guys and not just because he was clever, or good-looking. Well, he wasn't good-looking in a conventional sense, but he could've definitely been one of those *Benetton* models. You know, the ones who are borderline ugly. That's what Cora thought anyway. There were loads of girls who thought he was like all Mr Mysterious, but to me he was more like Mr Weirdo. I said to Cora that there was something no right about him, like concealing a secret or something. Sometimes I'd catch him staring right at me, not in a freak-show way, more in a crying-out-for-a-friend way.

Was I popular? When I was in fifth-year all the fifth- and sixth-years kept asking me out. I kept telling them to blow town. Which is a way of saying go away. Or rather Cora did on my behalf. None of them did anything for me. I snogged a couple of them but nothing beyond that. Or enough to get the heart cartwheeling. I wouldn't have gone that far with the guys at my school. No way. So, yes you could say that I was popular, but I wasn't a bitch or anything like that...it wasn't like *The O.C.* it was real life, and we were into keeping it real. *Real* real not in the rap way. I had friends from all the groups. Apart from the NEDs that is...Up here we call them NEDs...means Non Educated Delinquents. Could be a lot worse I suppose, like TITs...Total Idiot Thickos.

He was just different...well...because...because...well for a start, he had an accent. Anyone who had a different accent was automatically deemed to be cool. It's a sort of unwritten law in schools, isn't it? I mean if I went to an American school I'd be fighting them off with a big stick. He said words like girl and film without pronouncing the R or L properly. Gewl. It was kind of cute. And then there was his name. Most guys here are bogged down in all this I-want-to-be-Irish guff. Just because they were seventeenth generation Irish, or something like that, they all thought they were pure dead Irish. I mean, get a life! I blame their parents. Look around, everyone's called Liam, Keron, Conor, Sean, Niall or some other duff Irish name. It's really boring and predictable. So when we first heard the name Clem we thought it was pure hilarious. Then we realised that the name Clem made him sort of stand out from all the Irish wannabes. It was bomb how his name had that whole alliteration thing going

on as well, Clem Curran. You know, C and C. That's one thing I can thank Miss Croal for. I'm not exactly like Shakespeare at English but she explained what alliteration was by using his name as an example, that's how it sunk in. When I'm an old woman, forty or fifty or something, and I hear the word *alliteration* I'll automatically say 'Clem Curran' in my head. 'Cool Clem Curran' I said to Cora. 'Classy Cora and Cool Clem Curran cruising and kissing in a convertible coupe' she said back. I don't think kissing counts but. Suppose that was the start of it. No, it was that badge.

I had a *Bright Eyes* badge on my bag. Not the wee rabbits! *Bright Eyes*, the band. They were my favourites at that time. Not now. I still like them and all, but you know what young people are like. We change our favourite things from one week to the next. From one day to the next. Anyway, I was listening to loads of *Bright Eyes* stuff, couldn't get enough of them. So I went out and bought some badges for my bag. You know this fad with bags full of badges? I was tapping into it. If my mum put badges on her bags I'd be pure morto... Mortified.

Right, so me and Clem were partnered together in our Italian class to do some role-play stuff about tourists asking for directions in Rome, or somewhere like that. I mean, when will that ever come in handy? Don't get me started on language classes at our school. Anyway we were giving it all the 'you need to go straight down the road and turn left then take the first right and then you will see the Spanish Steps' jargon, all in Italian of course, when he clocks the *Bright Eyes* badge on my bag.

'I didn't know you were an emo chick', he said.

I said, 'who are you calling a flippin emu? And never call me a chick again.'

I didn't actually say the word flippin, did I?

Then when he told me what emo meant I felt like a total Paris. Then we had a conversation about music and school and students and teachers and just general angsty teenager car-crash stuff. He had some good chat. He told me where he was from, but it sounded too dull so we spoke about me. When I went home that night I was thinking about him loads and the next day I sort of fancied him.

I'd just then discovered *The Smiths*.

Cora Kelly's Opinion

Oh my God! It's not as if I fancied Clem or anything. Rosie's a pure liar if she said that. I can't believe people would even think that. That's a pure riot. We spoke about him:

A. Coz he was new to the school

and

B. Coz that's what we do when chatting about the guys.

All girls do that. You should hear what they say about us, by the way. Someone put it around that I gave this wee third-year a five-ten-double-ten after the third-year disco...A hand jive...you know, pulled him off. Then I heard all these wee third-years whispering to each other in the corridor. So I went to the guy with the motor gub and said that I'd boot his nose through his ear if he didn't say it was a load of crap. Let's say he quickly took it all back. I mean, why would I turn up at a third-year disco in the first place? I'm not into jigging away to *The Jonas Brothers* thank you very much. What I'm saying is don't believe everything you hear in here that's all. All it takes is one text message and the next thing you're the biggest slut in the whole school. Sometimes I wish I could go back to the olden days when they didn't have mobiles. My mum still talks about those days. Can you imagine it but? You'd be pure Billy No Mates.

Actually Rosie knew that I sort of fancied Conor Duffy. Even though he was into like football and all that male bonding crap, which is way uncool. I still liked him. Away from his pals he was actually okay. I could just about stomach all that *hail! hail! the Celts are here* drivel but there's no way I could've put up with all that we're-from-the-hood mince. Yeah right, in Glasgow? And you should hear the way they talk, as if they're from the manky part of town, with that pure cartoon Glasgow accent. It's totally put on coz I've heard the way some of them talk to their mums, and it's a billion miles from what comes out their traps in school. But I definitely drew the line at all the hip-hop singing and references. I mean have you heard *50Cent* and *JayZ* done in a Scottish accent? Sounds like an idiot with a speech impediment. I still liked him though.

It's like one of those guilty...thingymajigs...pleasures, that's right. A guilty pleasure. Rosie said he was a bit of a tosser, so I tried not to like him. No, I don't always do what Rosie tells me to do. You listen to your mates, don't you? I'm not hiding stuff here.

Clem?

Clem was okay, in a boring I'm-into-books-and-reading-all-the-time type of way. He had a funny name and a funny accent. Some girls are attracted to all that. They were all saying he was the spit of some guy from *The OC* but I never watch *The OC* so I couldn't really say. Too much teeth for my liking. To me it was like listening to someone off *Eastenders* or *Hollyoaks*. That's the most erotic it gets here...No, I don't mean that...Different, that's all...Exotic then. Erotic exotic same thing.

After about a week in school he had everyone eating out the palm of his hand. I called it the Robbie Williams effect. You know, all the guys want to...how do you know? Anyway there were some girls, especially in the year below, who were slobbering whenever he passed by them in the corridor, like they were at some *JLS* music store gig. It was pathetic. Believe it or not Miss Croal was the worst though.

She was practically salivating every time he came into her English class. Even I was embarrassed for her. No, I never gave her a hard time over it...well, maybe the odd wee comment here or there...nothing nasty.

Sometimes these new teachers need to be put in their place. It happens to them all. They're all full of innovation. It's so annoying. I mean, just give us a book and let us read it, or we'll pretend we're reading it. We don't have to examine what every blinking word means. I didn't even want to do English, it's not like I was going to do it as a career or anything like that. It's a boring head wreck. Worse than going to the school mass. I still look in the dictionary for swear words in English class to keep it exciting, that's how bad it is. Why do schools force everybody to do it? It doesn't make any sense. I say let all the nerds do it if they want and let the rest of us do extra classes on the subjects we enjoy...I sort of wanted to be a vet, but I'm mince at Biology and I don't really like the sight of blood. But I do like animals...who knows, maybe I'll do a drama course or something, I don't know yet. My guidance teacher suggested beauty therapy, and I was like: Christ on a bike, Sir, I'm not *that* thick.

It was kind of worrying when Clem came to the school coz I was worried that me and Rosie would both fancy him and there would be this pure tension between us, so I tried dead hard not to fancy him. Then when I heard him talking all that rubbish in the English class I knew that I could never fancy him. Not my type, you see. I reckon he must have been a Libran or something, coz Sagittarians and Librans can't stand each

other. Or is it Leos? Whatever he was, I could tell that we were totally out of sync. But I could tell that Rosie liked him. She was like pure rash material always looking at him when he wasn't looking and going all red and shy when he was about. For a time I thought she was going to turn into some mad-stalker bird. Thing is, Rosie could have gotten any guy in the school. All of fifth- and sixth-year guys thought she was a ride. She didn't cake herself in make-up like most of the dogs in fifth- and sixth-year, who thought they were pure God's gift. That's the thing about Rosie, she didn't know how good-looking she was.

I wasn't jealous...why would I be jealous? I had loads of guys chasing me. Even guys with cars and guys who were, like, working. I could hold my own. I didn't want a bf... boyfriend. I couldn't be arsed with all that 'childhood sweethearts' crap. It's not as if I was a slapper or anything like that, I just didn't want the hassle of a bf. No way. Stuff that! Half the girls from third-year up are probably on the pill so it's no great surprise. In fact, if you believe any of the stories in this place, half of the lassies in our year have probably been marched down to the abortion clinic at one time or another while the other half pop the morning-after pill as if they're Tic-Tacs. I was always careful. It's not like it's the eighties we're in. Anyway me and Rosie were totally different, not just in looks, for a start she was into all that oh-I'm-dead-depressed-I'm-going-to-slit-my-wrists music. She tried for ages to get me into it but it just made me want to self harm. I need beats and rhythm. Even if I wanted to I could never have fancied Clem; I'd never have done anything to hurt Rosie. She was my best pal.

Of course I'm shocked...

Am I sad? That's another thing, isn't it?

Pauline Croal's Understanding

It was my first position out of teacher training college so naturally I approached the job with a great deal of enthusiasm. I also had a duty to my students to engage them in the subject. Long gone are the days of the antiquated practice of teaching from the board or enforcing individual study throughout the duration of the lesson. I did try to be more innovative and foster an environment more conducive to the learning process. It's also what we were encouraged to do at college. After all, it's the reason I entered the profession.

No, I didn't find the school that difficult. Obviously I had no point of reference, however, I am led to believe from various members of staff that it was a tolerable school to work in. My own schooling wasn't that far removed from my teaching experience there. The school was full of characters. I liked that. Both students and staff alike. It's fair to say that some older members of staff didn't like their feathers being ruffled; they prefer to exist in the malaise. All that stereotypical stuff we are warned about as students, coffee mugs and specific seats belonging to certain teachers are all true. A solid phalanx of hostility was apparent. There is a definite hierarchy in school staffrooms. A few months of observing the political situations, I found it stuffy and embittered. There seemed no desire to embrace change; too many teachers were set in their ways, waiting for the bells to ring, for the summer to come around. There was also the cynicism that grated on me. Lots of my colleagues had nothing positive to say about the students they taught. To be honest I was a touch surprised by the sheer disregard and contempt they had for their profession. In any other industry they would have been sacked. However many teachers simply close their doors and exercise a methodology that has no place in modern education practice. It's too difficult to sack teachers these days. You have to cross a particular threshold for that to happen...I am babbling. I have a tendency to do that.

Obviously I am aware that this is a generalisation because not all teachers were like this. Some of us cared. I cared about my students and I invested in them. I endeavoured to encourage and cajole my students into developing a love for my subject. No, it didn't always work.

I suppose that's teaching for you. It could be said that I used my students as a solace from the challenges of the staffroom. They were my escape. I was continuously alert to the fact that I wouldn't allow the passion and fervour I showed for my subject to be misconstrued or misinterpreted. I was always aware of that. It's every teacher's nightmare. I was no different in that respect.

It was like any other fifth- and sixth-year class, some showed a real desire for English, others apathy, some quiet and unassuming while others were boisterous. Just your average classroom gene pool. Rosie Farrell? There was nothing that struck me as odd about Rosie; your typical senior-year girl, full of teenage angst and misplaced rebellion. She had a thing about me...that's not what I mean.

I mean she was distant and resentful for some reason. We didn't really develop much of a teacher/student relationship it has to be said. I had the impression that she felt that I had a different agenda other than that of getting them involved in the subject and success in their exam, which was in fact my only agenda. I have no idea whatsoever why she felt this way. I certainly wasn't going to challenge a sixteen-year-old girl on such matters. After all, I was the one who was in the position of responsibility. I had to show maturity, leadership and integrity; confronting a student simply because you have a distinct feeling that that student doesn't like you is unprofessional and short-sighted. I am afraid I wasn't that insecure about myself, or my methods, either.

Having said that, my understanding was that Rosie was a clever girl, sharp as a tac as well. I believed that she was more than capable of achieving anything she wanted to achieve. Actually I liked her individuality, or her desire to be individual. She seemingly didn't subscribe to what her peers were interested in. As regards her dress sense, the music she listened to or her general attitude, she was what you would call an emo girl. Which means emotional. It's related to that type of music. Emotional music, I'd imagine. It goes further than that, obviously, in the sense that it's linked to the general aesthetic and attitude. Iconoclastic, and subversive with a small 's'. Rosie certainly fell into that category; she was a fusion of these things. It's not as though we teachers don't listen to music. It should be a prerequisite that we have to garner knowledge of popular culture. If anything we are more attuned to teenagers than any other profession. I'd advise all teachers to watch the *X Factor*, *Big Brother* or *The Inbetweeners*. It's about trying to engage. It's not rocket science, you know.

Rosie had a flair for English; however, I don't think she could comprehend this. At times it's tough to be objective, to have that ability to stand outside yourself and analyse successes and areas for improvement. Maybe that's where teachers come in handy. I could tell that she had real potential. My understanding was that she enjoyed *Macbeth* and some of Shakespeare's sonnets.

I thought Cora Kelly was a noose around Rosie's neck. It was obvious that she was a bad influence on her; perhaps it was based on some intellectual inferiority complex or, indeed, a visual one. You know how teenage girls can be. I understood there to be a hint of resentment within that friendship. Cora could be an odious character, but there was something charmingly heartbreaking about her at the same time. She

required an audience; if Rosie wasn't in class for whatever reason Cora was like a morose dog without its owner. There was something more profound going on with that girl. None of my colleagues had a good word to say about her, but please don't take that as any kind of barometer. There was no way on earth that she was going to pass her exam. Why? Simply because she was weak, and indolent. I think it was suggested to her that she was maybe better off leaving school and enrolling in the local technical college to study beauty therapy. In my mind it was a good idea. I am not sure why she didn't; my theory is that she enjoyed the comforts, camaraderie and security that school provided her with.

Clem Curran? Well, that's the story, isn't it?

FOR ANYONE INTERESTED IN POLITICS, FINANCE OR ECONOMICS

Please also see *Understanding Brexit Options*, which is only available as an e-book

THE FINANCIAL SYSTEM LIMIT

In **The Financial System Limit**, the author challenges the existing academic and political consensus about how economies should be managed, showing that finance is the root cause of public dissatisfaction with the elite and their policies. Serious problems of both inequality and populism have their origin in monetary and economic policy. Estimates show that one-fifth of all economic output is spent on interest: this is too high an overhead and cannot be allowed to increase.

Reviews of The Financial System Limit

“One of the most fascinating books I’ve ever read ... I am recommending this book, and will, It is a must in one’s library and to be transmitted to next generations.”

Flo Jacquet, Teacher, France

“The author provides a historical view of how we reached the point where the level of global debt is unsustainable and now compounded by a global pandemic. The book is understandable by those without a deep financial background.

“Kauders, who has decades of experience as an investment manager makes the case for the difficult situation we, as global citizens, are confronted with.”

Librarything reviewer

“A very good book about the financial system. How debt works. How debt works and has worked for and against various countries at various times. Highly recommended!”

Hal Perlman, USA

“The book pleases to measure interest cost on total debt in relation to economic output. A deep recession and consequential financial upset were inevitable in a world that could not resolve the conflict between stimulus and austerity, a world that remained addicted to debt, a world that refused to admit the limit to the growth of debt caused by the cost of servicing it. That’s what David Kauders wants to highlight.”

Henk van der Klis, Netherlands

“Credit to Kauders for sharing his observations, experience and proposing solutions.”

Librarything reviewer

“This book by David Kauders provides some unique and interesting insights on macroeconomics and money in general. The topic of debt is such a complex and loaded topic but Kauders approaches it in an easy to understand manner (you don’t have to have an economics background). This book is a not a light read or an easy read but its worth the read.”

Reviewer, Canada

“The book starts with a ‘Definitions and Explanations’ section, which is helpful in clarifying some terms and concepts...

“One of the author’s main points seems to be that credit can not be created forever, because there reaches a point at which the debt level of a society makes repayment of the debt impossible. Kauders discusses this and other ideas, including the economic strategies of governments to deal with the pandemic, the true cost of debt, and economic cycles cause by central banking policies. His ideas about modern monetary theory and pensions are interesting.”

Review posted on amazon.com

Preview of The Financial System Limit, by David Kauders ISBN 9781907230264 (print), 9781907230776 (epub)

Chapter 1

When someone borrows money to put food on the table, they are in financial difficulty. When they have no hope of even paying the mounting interest bill, let alone repaying their debt, they are bust. This can also happen to a country, when so many people are in financial difficulty that there is no hope of the indebted population honouring its debts even if some people within it are debt-free. In this situation the said country has reached its financial system limit. Neither action by the individual, nor policy change by the authorities, can work off the debt because too much is being spent on paying interest. The underlying problem will manifest itself in many ways: curtailed business activity; inability of consumers to keep spending; falling prices of

assets that were propped up by easy credit; almost continual recession with only brief flashes of recovery. The financial system limit of any society is the debt level at which repayment ceases to be viable.

It is customary for economic statisticians to define highly indebted countries according to their government debt levels. However, for the purposes of this book, it is **total** debt that matters. Total debt is the sum of government debt, corporate plus banking system debt and personal debt. Personal debt itself consists of overdrafts, bank loans, mortgages and credit card debt.

Of the 36 current members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 28 feature in a list of countries having high levels of personal debt.² Personal debt is a developed-country problem. Prosperity has been bought, literally, on credit.

We have become used to central banks being able to conjure recoveries out of recessions. Each time a downturn has occurred, it has been swept away but downturns became deeper as the natural economic cycles of the past were augmented by policy-driven cycles. For example, in the United Kingdom, according to the Office for National Statistics, GDP fell by 4.2% in 2009, whereas in 1991 it only fell by 1.1%. In GDP terms, the dot com “bust” was represented by a lower growth rate.³

Serious financial and business journals have carried many reports and opinions about how central banks need to find new ways to counteract the recession that is unfolding around the world. The fashionable proposal is to use fiscal policy (that is, tax cuts and increased government expenditure) to stimulate economic activity. Such a policy can have no lasting benefit, for three reasons:

1. stimulating economic activity needs increased credit, but banks will not lend to bad risks just because governments have changed accounting rules for bank capital and bad debts;
2. tax cuts and/or increased government spending cause government deficits to rise. One could describe this as paying Peter now, to rob Paul in a few years time. This will lead the world into deflation.
3. new money raised by governments through borrowing will incur low positive

real interest rates at the outset, but turn into high positive real interest rates when general price levels fall.

Over the past quarter of a century, rates paid to depositors have collapsed, yet rates paid by borrowers have stayed comparatively high. Figure 1 contrasts three-month US Treasury Bill rates (a proxy for interest paid to depositors) with the average cost of US credit card debt including financing charges:⁴

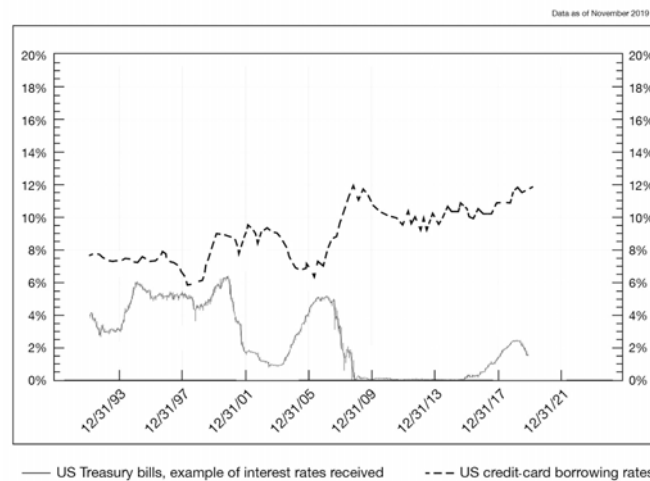


Figure 1: Paying more to the banking system

Comparing paid and earned interest rates in this way reveals how expensive credit is. From 1993 to 2001, the difference between the two rates was around 9%. In 2003, in the wake of the dot com crash, deposit rates hit new lows, with Treasury Bills only paying 0.81%. But at the same time, credit-card borrowers were paying around 14.7% on average, so the difference had risen to 13.9%. The credit crunch subsequently drove Treasury Bills down to nil yield but a few months later credit card rates were climbing, with the difference, as at December 2019, at around 15.4%.

Debt repayment has a real cost because inflation is so low. When real interest rates are positive and rates paid by borrowers exceed the inflation rate, borrowing consumes financial resources. For example, when inflation is 1% and credit-card borrowing costs 13%, the real rate of interest is 12%. Prior to the era of monetary management by central banks, real interest rates were usually 2% to 3%.

Symptoms of debt problems caused by excessive interest costs vary by country. In many cases, they can be measured directly by statistics such as consumer loan

defaults. In Britain, food bank use is an indirect measure of debt problems.

Following the 1987 stock market crash, the credit floodgates were opened wide to encourage more borrowing. When continuing that policy proved ineffective after the millennium boom and bust, quantitative easing was invented to push credit into the Japanese economy. This was later copied by other central banks although the methodology is now seen as ineffective. Instead of contriving ever more extreme measures to expand credit, why not ask what is preventing continued economic growth?

It is impossible for debt to expand to infinity because the cost of servicing it would then also be infinite. The financial system limit is determined by the cost of borrowing. It is best defined as **the proportion of economic output spent on interest on total debt, above which that debt can no longer be repaid in full.**

A logical proof

Existence of the financial system limit can be proved by logic:

1. Postulate that it does not exist and therefore debt can expand to infinity.
2. No matter how low interest rates charged to borrowers may go, any percentage of infinity is itself infinity. Therefore if debt can expand to infinity, interest paid must also expand to infinity.
3. Interest has to be defrayed from what is earned. Earnings can only be achieved by selling goods or services at a price others can afford. Therefore paying infinite interest requires trading an infinite supply of goods and services.
4. But an infinite supply of goods and services for sale can only be achieved if resources of people and nature are themselves infinite.
5. Since the supply of raw materials is finite and an infinite population could not feed itself, the proposition that debt can expand to infinity cannot be true ...

The world is now starting the sixth iteration of the central banking economic cycle:

1. The first of these cycles was the Japanese boom in the late 1980s

and subsequent bust, overlapping with the Western escape from the 1987 crash.

2. The second was the Asian boom, followed by the 1997 bust.
3. The third was the millennium boom and dot com bust.
4. The fourth was the 2002 to 2007 boom followed by the credit crunch.
5. Quantitative easing was used to drive recovery from the credit crunch, but this led to economic stagnation.
6. The authorities are now using both quantitative easing and fiscal stimulus in an attempt to neuter the economic effects of the pandemic and start another economic recovery.

Economic cycles always come to an end. The central banking economic cycle will be no exception.

In the days when the early Italian bankers invented debit and credit, there was no European Commission, Federal government or British regulator to lay down detailed prescriptive rules. Nowadays, politicians announce their demands, then set retinues of bureaucrats to implement their grandiose projects. The bureaucrats write detailed proposals, 'consult' on how the detail will work to ensure a degree of practicality, then write legislation to implement their design.

For alternatives to the present debt-based financial system to emerge, bureaucratic design and excessive standards must be constrained from further growth. Then some other kind of financial system might evolve, rendering the financial system limit less significant. Separation of debit and credit invented by the early Italian bankers has reached the end of its useful life. The challenge is to maintain the protections of the present system while providing an environment that encourages alternatives...

Authors who drive ideas forward are often expected to propose next steps, or perhaps prescribe what should be done. There are no easy answers to the problem of deflation

caused by excessive levels of debt. The priority should be to stop making the situation worse...

While I was writing the first draft of this chapter, *The Economist* published an article exploring current economic theories about debt. The theory that government debt crowds out productive debt featured in it, as did Modern Monetary Theory.

But what exactly qualifies as productive debt? And why is government debt not productive? These are meaningless diversions. Total world debt is what matters but the aggregate cost of interest and its relation to economic output was not even mentioned. Neither was the inability to expand debt to infinity, nor existence of a central banking economic cycle.

The *Financial Times* then published an opinion article that correctly noted the ratio of total world debt to economic output but also omitted to identify the same issues. The author thought that transparency would be the key to controlling debt. Instead of describing the wrong kind of debt, an approach this book rejected in Chapter 7, the article suggested that the world's debt problems arise from the wrong way of looking at debt. This book proposes that the right way of looking at it is to measure interest cost on total debt in relation to economic output.

The coronavirus pandemic will be seized on by the commentariat as the 'cause' of this economic crisis and conveniently scapegoated by politicians. The truth is that a deep recession and consequential financial upset was inevitable in a world that could not resolve the conflict between stimulus and austerity, a world that remained addicted to debt, a world that refused to admit the limit to the growth of debt caused by the cost of servicing it.

The central banking economic cycle is a crucial element in this depression. Every crisis—think of the dot-com bust and credit crunch as well as coronavirus—results in panic measures to extend economic stimulus. These measures inevitably add to the debt burden and the deflationary forces in the global economy, thereby bringing the financial system limit closer.

The debt-based financial system as we know it has run its course. The whole world is now over half-way to default. Whatever replacement to debt emerges, the world must ask: do we wish to compound economic and political upsets by continuing to expand

the supply of credit? Are short-term benefits worth the longer-term cost?

I have long subscribed to the view that the policy of constantly borrowing from the future would ultimately prove unsustainable and therefore some sort of debt reckoning would lie ahead. By throwing the entire world into deep recession, the coronavirus pandemic has brought the prospect of serious deflation closer.

Much deeper issues about the sort of society we wish to be will undoubtedly come into focus in the next few years. The very existence of the financial system limit needs to be part of such thinking. Academia has apparently failed to see how serious the debt problem is, instead producing irrelevant theories that miss the severity of the debt pile. Do we have to wait for most of the world to face Puerto Rican debt conditions before anyone notices?

For footnotes please refer to the published book

THE GREATEST CRASH: AVOIDING THE FINANCIAL SYSTEM LIMIT

The Greatest Crash explains why the financial system that evolved from the early Italian bankers can expand no further. It covers the broad failings of global finance.

Then it examines the contradictions, wishful thinking and paradoxes that give rise to so much financial trouble.

To escape this system limit, evolution is needed, but the obsession with regulation and conformity act to **prevent** evolution.

Reviews of The Greatest Crash

“Radical thinkers might have a point” - *Financial Times*

This review is available online at <https://www.ft.com/content/77d50a28-eb76-11e0-a576-00144feab49a>

“One of the things we need now is new thinking on the fundamentals... Most readers will learn a good deal from his provocative insights.”

Emeritus Prof. David Myddelton

Preview of The Greatest Crash, by David Kauders ISBN 9781907230240 (print), 9781907230257 (epub)

Group think

Mass delusions and the media crowd

After the credit crunch started, many commentators referred to the absence of alternative view points during the period 2003 to summer 2007 as “Group think.” There was a degree of hypocrisy about such comments, because the media were prime proponents of the story that Britain was booming. Viewpoints that this was completely false, and the credit merry-go-round would end in tears, were ignored. Only after a decent interval did some of the media admit that they knew of other views all along.

The story that Britain and the world had entered a new age of prosperity suited the Establishment. This rang true so long as the immediate, positive results of the debt spree were reported and the longer-term costs could be conveniently ignored. Of course, in an era of instant opinions, everyone believed the fiction, but it was nothing more than a mass delusion, propagated by a sympathetic media and aided by the Internet.

During the last decade, use of the Internet spread into every affluent household in the world. It has allowed popular view-points to be repeated ad nauseam, and thereby believed because of their repetition. A book appeared extolling the wisdom of crowds. However, the defining work on crowd delusions and mass behaviour is *Psychology of Crowds* by Gustave le Bon, written late in the 19th century. Le Bon noted the importance of images in impressing the crowd, a lesson politicians still observe today. He also noted that repetition is used to make a story credible, a lesson duly copied by those politicians who blamed bankers for being the entire cause of the credit crunch. Above all, le Bon thought the crowd was a blockhead, reduced to simplistic judgments in complete unison. The crowd determines that it must be right; dissenters are ignored; gurus appear to tell the crowd exactly what it wants to hear.

Every financial mania in history has depended on two crowd delusions: the image of easy riches and repetition of the story. These are the facts behind every Ponzi scheme and every scheme that needs new money rolling in to pay the earlier investors. They are the rationale for investment managers offering to jump on every passing bandwagon, ignoring the problem that if they all jump off together, prices will crash. We shall return to how investors participate in manias in chapter 8.

As financial pressures have grown, the media have resorted to two kinds of differentiation: speedy response, and opinion/editorial pages. Let's look at how they both work.

News reporting has moved from legions of local journalists having time to get to grips with events, to rapid response accumulation of text messages, photos, emails and mobile phone calls. Some trade journals even use computer programs to cull news stories from websites without human intervention.

The quality media differentiate themselves by employing opinion writers. So far as business and finance are concerned, there is a remarkable tendency for every source

to mimic what others are saying. Partly this is due to the pressure to produce copy quickly, sometimes in a few hours from brief to filing, and partly to the similarity of thought processes involved. Opinion-editorial writers themselves form a crowd, repeating the same stories uncritically. A classic example occurred early in 2010 when many British newspapers found reasons why Gilts were about to collapse in price, whereupon the Gilt market did the exact opposite and rose sharply.

There are a number of reasons why media opinions about markets are frequently wrong. The authors:

1. forget that every opinion anyone holds anywhere is already “in the price,” i.e. the market has discounted the story even before it is written;
2. have little understanding of the concept of leading and lagging indicators, so that lagging indicators such as unemployment and repossessions are hailed when they turn down, even though the next upturn is inevitable, and leading indicators such as capital market movements are simply disregarded as “obviously wrong because you don’t see the evidence around you”;
3. never consider the prospects for unpredicted change.

In 2008 the Guardian journalist Nick Davies, wrote a book that exposed shortcomings of the media. He called it Flat Earth News; the core of the book was the evidence that newspapers and others endlessly repeat opinions as facts. Davies did not refer to le Bon, but he had rediscovered the same mass delusions.

Consensus or contrarian?

The consensus dictates how most people see their financial futures, but the fundamental reason why the consensus has been so wrong over the credit crunch and the ‘recovery’ is that few understand the concept of the system limit. From this lack of understanding, flows the erroneous belief that economic relationships work in a set way. From this, incorrect conclusions that inflation is a threat, and that interest rates will rise, themselves follow.

There are likely to be increasingly desperate attempts to create inflation over the next few years. There is a simple reason why these attempts will ultimately fail. When interest rates go down or bank failures threaten, depositors withdraw their money

from banks. The bank credit multiplier then goes into reverse, with banks limiting their lending artificially. As a result economic activity slows down further. Only contrarian thinking can provide an alternative. Inability to think differently will lock many investors into declining capital bases and declining income as the financial crisis rolls on.

We live in a pseudo-dictatorship. In Britain, we elect new political dictators every five years then let them get on with it. Politicians, though, are not the real dictators. The real dictators are the consensus opinion-formers. They brook no dissent. Take, as an example, the release of UK GDP figures for the second quarter of 2010. Most newspapers and magazines produced a U-shaped graph showing how the economy had apparently recovered the lost ground. The graph was taken from the British government's National Statistics press release without thought. The impression formed was completely wrong. Why? Because the graph plotted a rate of change, which unfortunately ignored the absolute loss of output. The facts were:

- UK GDP 3rd Quarter 2008 £340,780 million
- UK GDP 2nd Quarter 2010 £328,766 million

This was the dictatorship of the consensus, followed faithfully in every story. There had been insufficient growth to recover the lost ground, yet nobody recognised this.

Repetition of simplistic, self-evidently "true" stories drove the South Sea bubble, the Japanese bubble, the Technology, Media and Telecommunications bubble, the property bubble and the commodity bubble. It also influenced policy nostrums, such as using higher interest rates to fight inflation, while ignoring the desperate need of the authorities to create inflation and their utter inability to do so. Repetition spread the idea that the dollar needed to be devalued to solve America's financial problems; instead, the dollar rose. This example demonstrates another truth: when found out, the consensus simply move on and ignore their gross error. When the Establishment get it totally wrong, they just forget. Opinion is a fashion business, not a science.

Some examples of group think

Most investors are obsessed with inflation, property and commodities. The obsession was fed by news stories repeating the same "look how well you do" line. It's a form of propaganda, perhaps unintentional, but certainly effective. One absurd news item

caught my eye: a report about how investors were buying mobile phone masts to rent out, on the grounds that the yield would be higher than on residential buy-to-let. But the mobile phone business has already peaked and internet based technologies such as voice over internet protocol have started to affect total demand. This is one reason why the mobile industry is in some difficulty, added to overpaying for 3G licences. Mobile phone masts can too easily be made redundant by changes in network topography or demand.

As another example, the plan (arising from the European Union) to replace standard light bulbs by low energy models to save energy wasted as heat is an example of group think. Much criticism has been directed to the mercury content of such bulbs, while missing the accounting trick: little or no energy will be saved! Domestic lights are usually on after dark in winter. Summer usage is trivial in comparison. Most homes have central heating. Taking away the heat source of the humble light bulb will lead to the central heating boiler cutting in more often and using more energy to maintain the same temperature. It is true that there will be a small saving by reducing marginal use of electricity and therefore marginal production of electricity, since fuel conversion to electricity is more expensive than direct use of the same fuel in central heating.

This dominance of group think is not new. It is the converse of Shaw's dictum: 'Reasonable people adapt themselves to the world. Unreasonable people attempt to adapt the world to themselves. All progress, therefore, depends on unreasonable people'.

Those who exploit fashion use the desire of reasonable people to conform with the majority. Fashionable opinions inspire and reinforce group think. Group think is endemic in the way our society is structured. It is not going to vanish. But it extends beyond the media and the way we are conditioned to think....

One of the remarkable points that I have found in writing this book is that many of the detailed errors, incorrect policies et al, have already been amply documented by others. But we never learn. The delegated society, the strength of lobby groups and vulnerability of our political system to pressure, the sheer volume of noise in the media and on the Internet, the immediacy of the demands of daily life, all combine to make our collective memory rather short.

REINVENTING DEMOCRACY: IMPROVING BRITISH POLITICAL GOVERNANCE

British politics, but ideas relevant to other countries

90% of electors want political reform. But how to escape the mess? Britain should adopt a federal structure with a written constitution and an elected apolitical People's Council replacing autocratic and ineffective bodies.

The United Kingdom needs fundamental change

Already we see that Labour are not thinking strategically about the causes of British decline. Tackling symptoms without the root causes is unlikely to be effective.

Britain faces major challenges:

- The climate crisis
- An over-centralised State that cannot cope with the complexity of the twenty-first century
- A tax base that favours oligarchs at the expense of the people
- Determination to carry on the way things have always been done - "Nothing changes"
- Putting right the continuing damage done by a hard Brexit

This book offers one possible solution. It's meant to move the country's thinking forward. The book calls for major reforms like implementing federalism, creating a written constitution, establishing a People's Council, and redefining the monarchy's role. It investigates the failures within the system, poor policy decisions, and the negative impacts of neo-liberal policies, proposing solutions to improve democracy, economic performance, and international status.

Only the people can bring about change. This book is a starting-point for discussion.

Read the book now if you would like UK society and governance improved.

Ignore the book if you are happy with everything the way it is.

There is much waiting for you to discover, including the first-draft written constitution of the UK.

Reviews of Reinventing Democracy

“Kauders’ call for a written constitution and a federal association is not just relevant to the United Kingdom but holds lessons for any nation grappling with democratic challenges. *Reinventing Democracy* is an important catalyst for discussion and a rallying cry for a more accountable and responsive political system.” - *London Economic*

The above review is online in full at the *London Economic*, see <https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/entertainment/reinventing-democracy-by-david-kauders-371783/>

“A powerful, persuasive, and timely wake-up call for transforming the UK into a federal state. A must-read.” Richard Moriarty - *The Sun*

“A compelling and clear pathway out of Britain’s failing political morass towards a brighter, truly democratic future...

“*Reinventing Democracy* courageously tackles the gross failures of the British political system. Through concise and reasoned argument, Kauders asserts that the current system is at the root of economic and social decline, including rising poverty and collapsing public services...

“Kauders’ call for a bold revitalisation of democracy through a federal system – one that he argues with persuasion will truly empower the people – is timely and essential reading, making this book a valuable contribution to the discourse on political reform.” - *The European*

The above review is online in full at *The European*, see <https://the-european.eu/story-33875/reinventing-democracy-by-david-kauders.html>

For reviews by the public see <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/209359602-reinventing-democracy>

On a scale of 100% democracy to 100% autocracy, Britain must rank as one of the least democratic countries, an autocratic country excepting an occasional change in the ruling elite. The key element of British democracy is that two parties compete for absolute power: two autocrats take turns at imposing their world view. The first-past-the-post electoral system prevents other parties from competing, which would surely be a breach of competition law if that law applied to politics as regards monopolies and duopolies. Differences compared to North Korea are a matter of degree (isolation, falling living standards, dislike of foreigners, loss of rights, and restricted travel are common to both countries) although North Korea is many decades behind the UK in terms of living standards. The reason Britain is so undemocratic is that the supposedly flexible unwritten British constitution slowly removes power from the people and hands it to the elite. Governments with control of the Commons can pass any legislation they like. When they legislate to fix a constitutional problem only two situations can result:

1. The fix becomes a nuisance after a time, in which case they legislate again to overturn it. Hence fixed-term parliaments, to bind the 2010 coalition together, overturned by the 2019 government. Likewise, the 2011 law to prevent transfer of more power to the EU, overturned when it obstructed the arrangements for leaving. Both of these examples originated during the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition and were reversed by later Conservative governments.
2. The fix reduces democratic accountability, in which case it becomes permanent and not open to challenge. Lloyd George stripped the Lords of power to block the Commons indefinitely, and even Gordon Brown did not dare to propose restoring such power to his intended assembly of the nations and regions.

Britain is not alone. The West faces a collective problem of rising autocracy. China is slowly forming a grouping of autocratic client states. Russia is now a Chinese client state, dependent on sales of oil and gas, through a new pipeline (not yet complete), to offset Western sanctions. India and South Africa chose not to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine and have participated in naval exercises with China. Iran and Saudi Arabia, long bitter opponents in the Shia-Sunni divide, restored diplomatic

relations following Chinese intervention. The future world order will be autocratic states led by China, versus democratic states. If a future American president loses interest in the world of free democratic nations, who will lead the democracies? ...

The key benefits of federalism would be:

1. Decisions would be closer to the people, who could contribute ideas.
2. Nations and regions could follow policies suited to their own best interests.
3. Many existing politicians could move from the UK level to one of the nations.
4. The existing career path for politicians would shorten, and good people would be more likely to come forward.
5. The honours system of patronage could wither.
6. A simple cash transfer mechanism could replace all funding formulae, allowing nations to achieve more equality in personal living standards.
7. More time could be spent scrutinising legislation (the Commons does not do this⁵⁰).

There is one overarching benefit of federalism. The need for a strong person to hold everything together at the centre disappears. Recent times have shown that prime ministers are human, can make mistakes, and can be dominated by factions in their own parties. Why then do we allow one person to have absolute power? Why do we allow a change of person at the top to cause a complete change of policies? *Without* democratic consent? The person at the centre should represent the entire UK on the international stage, rather than being preoccupied with manoeuvres for domestic advantage ...

A hung parliament arising out of public disaffection with our political system might just be open to a deal between several smaller parties and more thoughtful large party backbenchers to avoid a further election by insisting on policies that the party leaders would rather avoid. It all depends on how strongly the people say “We want democratic reform instead of this slide to autocracy.” ... Adopting the concepts in this book would be one way a future government could serve the people. ... This is the only way to reverse the damage of multiple failed policies that culminated in the United

Kingdom imposing trade sanctions on itself.

Extracted from chapters 1, 4 and 7. See published book for footnotes.

FOR ALL ADULTS WHO ENJOY CRIME, MYSTERY AND THRILLERS

Please also see *Further Exploits of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Sicilian Woman's Daughter*, both of which are only available as e-books

ELLIPSIS – NOIR/PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

“Right on time,” Daniel Mansen mouths to Alice as she pushes him to his death. Haunted by these words, Alice becomes obsessed with discovering how a man she didn’t know could predict her actions. On the day of the funeral, Daniel’s cousin, Thom, finds a piece of paper in Daniel’s room detailing the exact time and place of his death.

As Thom and Alice both search for answers, they become knotted together in a story of obsession, hidden truths and the gaps in everyday life that can destroy or save a person.

Ellipsis is a disturbing thriller stemming from what is left unsaid, what bounces around in the mind and evaporates when trying to remember. Can there be a conclusion when no-one seems to know the truth?

You can also buy this book in an omnibus edition, *Three British Mystery Novels*

Reviews

“It’s a tale that will keep them wondering, gasping, thinking, smiling, grimacing, rereading. What more can a reader ask for?”

Spinetingler Magazine

“Tight, evocative gut-punches tempered by the desperate details of everyday life.”

Shawn Kupfer, author of *White Male*, 34

“This is the type of story that keeps a reader up half the night.”

Maureen Vincent-Northam, author of ‘The Writer’s ABC Checklist’ and ‘The Greatest Genealogy Tips in the World’, Hereford

“I wouldn’t have stopped reading if my house was on fire!”

Cas Peace, author of ‘For the Love of Daisy’, North Hampshire

"The pacing is excellent, the characters fragile, flawed and consumed with grief and guilt. I could not recommend this book enough."

Review posted on goodreads.com

"An intriguing, satisfying read"

David Hebblethwaite

"Ellipsis is a very stylish, compelling read that will stay with you for a long time, and Sparkling Books have very much lived up to their name in their presentation of this title. Nikki Dudley has a burgeoning literary career that should go on from strength to strength following the publication of the magnificent Ellipsis. I look forward to reading more works by this great writer."

Kevin Mahoney, Authortrek.com

"Exciting, psychologically complex, and disconcerting, it is a powerful tale of two misfits trying to uncover long hidden secrets about themselves and their pasts. Dudley has an often startling eye for description and her simple poetic prose will delight readers looking for something slightly different in the crime thriller genre."

Sam Ruddock, Writers' Centre, Norwich

"This is a work of literacy .. the pleasure is in the writing style"

The Truth About Books

Preview of Ellipsis, by Nikki Dudley ISBN 9781907230189 (print), 9781907230219 (epub)

1 Red Snake

I chose him because of the red scarf.

My palms sweat. Dirt from the walls is smudged across them and slithers in the folds. There is a faint smell of kebab in the air and an excited murmur moving down the platform like Chinese whispers. I wonder how distorted the message will be by the time it reaches my end.

Can you hear it too, Mum? Do you think they're whispering about me?

There are other scarves too, red and white combined and I guess that a football game must have taken place. Yet, his scarf is different. It is pure red, the red people affix to the badge of fiery passion, the badge of cold-blooded murder, without the interludes of white to dull its beauty.

He is unique. I've watched him for weeks now and the time has finally arrived. The clock says 15:32 as casually as ever but it secretly signals to me: this is the correct time. It is not destiny; it is careful planning and the instinctual knowledge inside.

Mum, this is the moment.

Now, my breath barely disturbs the stillness of the cavern the swarm of strangers are gathered in, all awaiting the rush of wind that will open up the arteries, revive us. Everybody appears lost, shuffling on their feet, staring at the same grotesquely large posters until they become less overpowering, fiddling with buttons, holding their phones and longing for reception. Anything to avoid eye contact.

My favourite moment is the shared objective, the upraised eyes facing the same direction, the temporary and forced community as the wind invites the dusty air to dance, flings the litter in celebration. All I can do to keep calm is count the seconds down in my head. Even when I think of you, you are bouncing in my mind.

The only details I know about him have been gathered through observation from afar. This is actually the closest I have been to him in three weeks. From here, I can smell his sweat weaving with his aftershave. I can also see how he has missed a belt loop and a tiny bald patch in the back of his hair, perhaps where he has a birthmark.

Are you excited too, Mum? I know you've been thinking about him when we've been trying to sleep. Now, we're so close...

He is reading one of those trashy papers that have stormed the city. The wires of his iPod headphones are coming out of his ears and snaking down his chest to his jacket pocket. If he knew what is about to happen, would he change the song he is listening to, faintly nodding his head, and not struggling to remember the throwaway words? Would he fling down that paper and rush off to buy his favourite book?

It is the scarf that ensnared me. I had been wandering the streets three weeks before,

in another dimension of thought or nowhere at all. Then, it flashed at me, like a camera suspending a moment in time. It is a snake that has coiled around my attention and shot its venom into my blood. I latched onto the scarf and followed it all the way home. The rain tried to bully my eyes closed but I stood firm, keeping them set on the scarf weaving through the grey world. When he reached his house, I stood outside for another half an hour, smiling, pouring with gratitude.

Since then, he has been my daily plot. Today, he has thrown his scarf on haphazardly, perhaps being late or not wearing it for warmth but simply out of habit. I can only guess who bought it for him. His girlfriend? His mother? An old friend or relative who put no thought into a present for him? Or perhaps he chose it himself and red is also his favourite colour.

Despite following him, I recall very little about his appearance and when I try to remember three days later, I won't have a clue. I can guess that he has black hair but then I can also guess it is blond. I can say he's short or maybe tall. I can say he is black, white or Asian. Yet the fact is; I haven't paid attention. When the photo appears in the paper, I will look on it as fresh-eyed as everybody else.

What I remember most is a sense of him, a presence. He is like a positive image in a photograph where the rest has been inverted. Even more peculiar is the sense that he is aware. Sometimes I have caught him pausing in the street, as though to let me catch up. Another time, when he was trying on clothes, he seemed to single me out in the mirror and mentally ask my opinion.

The countdown begins to flash: ****STAND BACK TRAIN APPROACHING****. My chest implodes and the rest of my body springs alive. All I hear is a harmony of sounds: beating inside and the roar of the train.

Step forward.

Peer into dark.

Wind hisses at hot skin.

Folding newspapers.

Roar gallops in heart.

Eyes of light emerge.

Monster creeps closer.

A unison of feet.

Red scarf flutters.

Spring forward.

Head slightly turns.

Outstretched arms connect.

Eyes of train wide.

Mouths silent words.

Falling.

Newspaper flailing.

Reach out.

Touch the scarf.

Train screeches.

Screaming.

Monster engulfs.

Faces press up to windows.

Scarf a ball in fist.

I breathe. Stop. Think: Right on time. As he fell, his lips moved in the shape of these words: Right on time. Right on time. Right. On. Time.

Mum, did you see?

2 The Phone Call

At 15:32 a day later, Thom Mansen stops. He drops his pen as though it has stung him.

He pushes away from the desk and stretches his legs. He doesn't pick up the phone even though it cries out. He stops and cannot find a place to start again.

He wonders what his boss would say if he went to his office and said, "I've stopped and I can't begin again". Would he himself be able to explain this? He doubts it. He doesn't feel hungry yet, he doesn't need to piss, and life is unusually 'fine'. In fact, his boss even suggested a promotion might be in the works and he hasn't argued with his girlfriend in months.

So he is lost.

Perhaps he has some rotting disease that works its way to the surface inside out and that's why he feels strange. Perhaps his heart has stopped and he has unknowingly passed into death at his desk whilst helping Mrs Rayder understand that her policy does not cover the death of her beloved tomcat, Bubbles.

He laughs into the air. "Shit", he mumbles, knowing it's entirely possible for this to be the case. Yet, hearing his own voice reassures him that he is still in a physical realm of existence, not in a twisted form of limbo where everything is similar to the life he has been leading up to this point.

The pen lies on the pile of paperwork. He stares, narrows his eyes, screams at his hand to move forward a few inches and clutch it. But his hand ignores him. His eyes begin to ache and tire in their sockets. He closes them for a few moments and reopens them.

Yet, he still doesn't move. He begins to panic and thinks he's having a stroke or an unworldly force is possessing him. But he knows he has to meet Emma later at the restaurant. Will he make it? Will his body simply imprison him here throughout the night? He would much rather be with Emma, having sex, talking about nothing.

He sees the light of the phone glaring at him. There are incoming calls on four lines. He is sure one of them is the old man who phones every day, pretending to ask questions about his housing policy, but in reality just wanting to connect with another human being. Apart from that, it could be any one of the thousands of customers, waiting to chew an ear off.

"Come on Thom, get yourself together!" He shakes out his shoulders. He smiles at his progress and prepares to get back to his day. However, he now finds he has no desire

to pick up the pen, to continue signing the rejections on policies, to hear another customer saying “of course I read the fine print” when they haven’t, to continue in any way at all.

He goes through every part of his job specification in his mind and cannot put a tick by any of the duties. He watches the other people walking by his office through the glass, like a helpless goldfish not functioning at the same level or speed. They are all busy – moving papers, picking up phones, and chatting about who’s shagging who this week. What is stopping him from doing the same?

He imagines if any of them cared enough to notice him, what they would see. A man, who is clean-shaven, has straight and recently cut brown hair (which curls at the sides if he doesn’t monitor it), a straight tie, a dribble of ink trailing from his lip that he doesn’t know about. Thom complies with every rule about uniform in the employee’s handbook; he is the physical representation of company policy. Would they know he hasn’t moved for five minutes? Would they assume he has been working up until the moment they happened to glance in?

Although his body is functioning again, Thom’s mind is suddenly heavy. His head drops into his chest like his neck has dissolved. A depression pulses through him, makes his chest rise and fall in a pitiful sigh, makes his body sprawl out on the desk like a person who has just suffered a heart attack. He watches his breath make a mist on the wooden face of the desk.

Abruptly, the phone stops wailing. Then ten seconds later, it rings again.

He grabs hold of the receiver. He balances it on his face which is still flat against the desk and awkwardly muffles, “Hello. Thomas Mansen”.

“Thom. It’s Richard”.

Thom shoots up as though someone has electrocuted him. “Rich, what’s going on?” It’s the voice... He can tell from the first syllable, the downward direction of the tone.

Richard delays, his breathing heavy for a moment. “Thom... it’s about Daniel”. Thom is sure Richard is crying, or perhaps he has a cold. “He’s dead”. Crying, then.

“What?” Thom stutters, then again, “what?”

“He fell under a train. Yesterday”. Richard’s words are so direct, poisoned darts that keep hitting him. Thom’s chest starts to tighten; his bones are shrinking like clothes washed at the wrong temperature. “I’m sorry I didn’t call earlier. Aunty didn’t take it well, obviously... I had to call the doctor”, Richard adds, making Thom feel like he has been squeezed out of his body and now lingers somewhere above the desk, not knowing the way back in. He needs to get to Aunty Val.

“Oh”, is all Thom says.

And then he listens to Richard, talking about the funeral, an inquest, the reading of the will and asking can he come and can he bring Emma, and Aunty Val would’ve called herself but she is still crying, and she needs him there. Tonight.

3 The Note

Highbury and Islington station. 15:30 Sunday.

It is Daniel’s handwriting. Thom recognises the way Daniel crosses his Ts with slanted lines, the way the top of his zeros never quite meet. Not meet, met. Daniel won’t be in the present tense any more.

At this, the note in Thom’s hand starts to shake and he buckles onto the bed.

Thom supposes he should know better than to snoop in Daniel’s things. Looking in Daniel’s possessions is similar to how it had been trying to relate to him in life. Thom feels like he is swimming against the current and he has found a small piece of flotsam, but it instantly falls apart. This note could be written in Chinese, for all the sense it made.

There are so many drawers in Daniel’s room, small ones for tiny secrets, large ones with small compartments inside; large ones ordered in such a way that no one would dare touch a thing. Thom can smell Daniel’s authority. Invisible foot soldiers are standing guard around the room, willing to die in order to protect his classified information.

Yet here Thom is, having been compelled by the only drawer half open, like a partly opened wound. He shouldn’t be in here anyway, as Aunty Val and Richard haven’t

even managed to open the door a crack. He is trespassing because he knows Daniel won't be able to stop him. He wants to see the magician's secrets that have bemused him for so long. He has poked around in this drawer and his hand has seemingly come out dripping with blood and sticky with pus, and all he wants to do is stuff everything back inside and close it up.

He refocuses on the note.

This is the time and place he died.

Thom shivers and tosses the note away at the thought. Yet moments later, he slowly leans closer to it and re-reads it at least ten times. He is a mouse tiptoeing around a mousetrap.

What do these words mean? Was Daniel meeting someone? And were they involved with his death? Was it suicide even? Or is this merely a coincidence that he wrote down this time and place, when they just so happened to denote almost to the minute, his death?

Thom feels his stomach groaning in part shock and part confusion. He rushes to the toilet and vomits. This has happened before, only a few times in his life – well, the worst times if he is honest. However, although he has clearly vomited up most of his breakfast, the questions remain inside Thom, like ulcers, nagging and ugly. He washes out his mouth with cold water and makes his way back to Daniel's room.

The note is still there. Thom doesn't know why the note shouldn't be there still, but perhaps he would prefer it to disappear; leave him alone to be sad about Daniel. The last thing he needs is more questions. Whenever somebody dies, there are enough questions anyway. All he can think about is the last time he'd been in the hold of this endless interrogation, when he'd just turned twelve, and both his parents hadn't come home. He'd vomited then too. A few times in fact.

Oddly enough, this room is where Thom was transported that night. He vaguely recalls Aunty Val kissing him goodnight whilst Daniel watched from the doorway, having been evicted for the night to the sofa. Thom felt unsettled then by the clatter of the railway that ran behind the house, but over the course of his adolescence it became as natural as birdsong.

In this moment however, the sound of the railway makes him feel nauseous. Although thankfully, he has nothing left to eject. He looks down at his suit and, seeing a vomit stain on his left cuff, rubs at it anxiously. If he turns up at Daniel's funeral covered in vomit, surely he may as well smear it over the coffin. After all, they were more than just cousins, yet not quite brothers.

Now that Thom thinks properly, he wishes he had known Daniel as well as he did Richard. Although, he and Daniel were the same age and even shared the same birthday, it seems these things merely gave them more reason not to bond. Instead, as soon as Thom arrived after his parents' deaths, he and Richard, who was two years older, fell into a closer friendship.

Thom tried with Daniel, yet Daniel didn't seem interested. Whenever Thom pictures their shared birthday parties, Daniel is set back in some way, a step further from the table where everyone was singing 'happy birthday' or at Christmas, Daniel waited until everyone else had torn at their presents frantically and only then, he carefully chose one to begin with.

And what is the last thing he had said to Daniel? He searches through his memory and can only come up with a brief conversation at Richard's last birthday party. Daniel was standing by the front door. They exchanged pleasantries about general health and jobs. And what is it that Thom said to him? His last proper words to his cousin; face to face?

"Daniel, do you know where Aunty Val is?"

"In the kitchen". He nods towards the house. His smile acknowledges what they both feel; a need to find an exit as fast as possible, a sad knowledge that they will never linger with each other.

"Thanks. Speak later".

Yet Thom didn't speak to him later. And he never would again.

Thom wishes now he had tried harder. If not to be closer to him in life but for this moment, in order to understand this note, to understand why Daniel had written it so precisely and had left it in the only half-open drawer in the room, as if he knew ...

Ellipsis is also available in an omnibus edition, *Three British Mystery Novels*, ISBN 9781907230738 (print), 9781907230745 (epub)

WHEN ANTHONY RATHE INVESTIGATES – FOUR PRIVATE DETECTIVE MYSTERY PUZZLES

The original Anthony Rathe stories of courtroom criminal cases appeared on American public radio, syndicated by the late Jim French through his *Imagination Theater*. **When Anthony Rathe Investigates** continues where the radio stories finished.

Prosecuting criminal cases, **barrister Anthony Rathe** convinced a jury to imprison an innocent man, who subsequently took his own life. Horrified at his mistake, Rathe abandons his glittering legal career, vowing to truly serve justice. A series of cases come his way.

These four stories, linked by how Rathe is racked with guilt over the suicide, explore crime from a different angle: determination to find the truth, no matter how inconvenient to the investigating officer, **Inspector Cook**. The reader is invited to join Rathe in solving these complex mysteries.

The first story, *Burial for the Dead*, exposes sordid family history that led to a murder in a church. In *A Question of Proof*, Inspector Cook needs Rathe to unravel an underworld murder; in *Ties that Bind* Rathe solves a crime of passion; and in *The Quick and the Dead*, modern slavery intrudes into his own personal life.

Reviews

"This had a perfect balance of deduction and soul searching to make the main character compelling. The mysteries were well written with refreshing style."

Bridgit Davis, South Africa

"Short form crime fiction is difficult. The author cannot rely on red herrings, a host of possible suspects, or deeply technical sleuthing. The scene, character and plot must come immediately. The four novellas of this book are masterpieces of their kind.

"Meet Anthony Rathe, a barrister who abruptly retired from practice when a brilliant prosecution resulted in an innocent man's conviction and subsequent suicide. He is now a shade of his former self, haunting the cemetery staring at gravestones

meditating on justice. Until, that is, he is forced to consider (not investigate really) four different murders, one for each novella.

“Rathe is a handsome, wealthy, cultured, yet empathetic man who listens to his intuition. Each story is different and enjoyable, if a bit reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes written by Martin Gatiss.”

Anonymous, USA

“This was not my usual read but I enjoyed it. I liked the character Rathe very much. This felt more like a gentlemanly approach to crime detection. The fact that Rathe was trying almost to redeem himself from his previous behaviour made him even more appealing. Each case was self contained and fairly succinct. I enjoyed the change in pace from more grisly stories.”

Sue Ross, UK

“Well, this was a little different. Set in the present but written in a style that suggests a much earlier time setting. So much so that, for me, I slipped into the past and then was jolted back to the present by some mention of technology. This made for an interesting read!

“So, what we have here is four shortish stories all connected by one concept. Anthony Rathe considers himself guilty of the death of a young, troubled man who, upon being found guilty and sentenced, subsequently killed himself in prison. Rathe finds out later that he was actually innocent of the crime he was imprisoned for and so visits his grave often throughout the book and, despite assurance from the boy’s mother, still holds himself responsible. To try and gain some redemption, he makes it his mission to solve other injustices. Whether they be current or historical, he teams up with Inspector Cook and together they do their best to prove innocence, or otherwise, of several characters throughout the book.

“I am not the biggest fan of short stories but I do like anthologies and even though, with the brevity of the tale being told, there is not much wriggle room for the usual twists and turns you find in longer forms of crime fiction, I found that there was just enough for me to get my teeth into with these. Yes, they were occasionally a little bit obvious at times, but I mostly put that down to my voracious devouring of the genre

rather than anything the author did.

"Slightly annoying angst aside, I did like Rathe as a character and I thought that his relationship with Cook was well done. They don't really like each other initially but have a mutual respect for one another and it was interesting to see their relationship develop throughout the book.

"As with the relationship between the two main characters, I thought that the stories they embroiled themselves in also got better through the book. The final one being my favourite, and also the most shocking; cause and effect anyone!

"All in all, a nice anthology containing four interesting stories, played out by some well rounded characters, written in an interesting old-feeling style. Hopefully there will be more to come in the series, I'll definitely be up for that!"

Kath Brinck, UK

"Great storyline with good strong characters. Very well written. I would recommend this book to anyone."

Stephanie Collins, UK

"This gripping collection of detective stories is an excellent blend of contemporary and traditional crime drama. Each story is tightly plotted, exciting, and each with a satisfying twist at the end. There is a variety to the stories, ranging from dark secrets being exposed to genuinely tragic family secrets coming to light.

"But the real success of these stories are the two main characters and their relationship. Rathe is a fascinating and original character, a troubled man trying to make sense of his life in the wake of a tragedy which still haunts him. Contrasted with Rathe's private quest for redemption is Inspector Cook, a man with his own troubles, trying to come to terms with the violence he sees in his everyday life in the best way he can.

"The contrast between the two of them is set off against their mutual desire to find the truth and it forms the basis of an uneasy alliance. It is their uncertain partnership which sets these stories aside. It is not the usual detective duo combination and this amiable hostility between them is a welcome change. Rathe and Cook are wary of each

other but what these stories show so well is the slow building of trust and respect between them as they investigate the crimes at the centre of these four excellent stories. A sequel can't come soon enough."

Shirley Rothel, UK

"He investigates now because he's driven by guilt. One of his cases went badly and he can't forgive himself. So he is going to try to find justice for those cases he's asked to help on.

"These are short stories of several cases, all of them sad. Trying to prove who the real villain is can be hard and unrewarding but Rathe doesn't give up. He's trying to balance the scale and make his life feel right again.

"The stories aren't easy to figure out but Rathe does it. I don't think I'd like him breathing down my back either. Give it a read. It'll make you think about life..."

Jo Ann Hakola, Bookseller, USA

"Four stories focus on the quest for truth and justice, no matter how inconvenient. To build up trust and tension Rathe's private investigations are contrasted to Inspector Cook. The stories read like a classic crime story on TV, concise, and conversations to look into the investigator's line of thought to solve the whodunnit puzzle."

Henk-Jan van der Klis, Netherlands

"A good book of shorter stories featuring a lawyer after helping convict an innocent man who later committed suicide. Said lawyer - Rathe - overcome with guilt and despair finds himself continually helping a policeman in intriguing cases that help draw him out of his despair. Well written and definitely worth the read."

Matthew Shank, USA

"Anthony Rathe is a disillusioned former lawyer having left the bar because an innocent young man called Marsden, whom he prosecuted, committed suicide in gaol. As a result, haunted by guilt and shame, Rathe finds himself investigating crimes of passion where injustice is evident. 'The Marsden disgrace', as Rathe views the matter,

is a connecting thread through the four stories in this excellent collection as he attempts to atone for his perceived sin.

“Anthony Rathe is a fascinating character who works in a solitary fashion down the narrow line between the police and the legal system. He is a wonderfully incongruous mix of the stoical and passionate. Here we have a character who is intriguing and pleasingly different from the run of the mill sleuths who people modern crime fiction. Indeed his heritage is in the tradition of the unusual golden age detective who is neither a tired policeman nor the risibly eccentric private detective. He is a very welcome addition to the raft of modern crime solvers.

“In this collection we have a quartet of stories in which Rathe solves a series of murders. I think of these as cabinet detective tales in that the mysteries are tightly plotted and cunning, while involving only a small cast of players, which works well with Booth’s rich and intense storytelling style. He is particularly good with atmosphere and Rathe’s internal monologues. The characters are expertly drawn and psychologically accurate. While at times we are in Agatha Christie whodunit territory with the plots which challenge the reader to spot the culprit before the denouement, the literary quality of the writing adds an elegant and realistic patina to the narratives.

“One of the added pleasures of these stories is the growing uneasy relationship Rathe has with the police detective Inspector Terry Cook, a belligerent but very human copper who tolerates rather than accepts Rathe’s interference in his cases. Indeed on occasion he sometimes seeks his help, albeit begrudgingly. The two men rub each other up the wrong way most of the time, but Booth subtly reveals that there is a respect growing between them. It’s an engaging double act.

“Anthony Rathe is a new star on the crime fiction stage and this reviewer wants more, please.”

David Stuart Davies, UK

“This was a collection of mystery short stories, all of them interesting and quite enjoyable. Anthony Rathe leaves his legal career behind after a wrongly accused man commits suicide and takes on cases in his almost obsessive attempt to unveil the truth, help those he knows, and find a way to forgive himself for his past errors.

“The mysteries were interesting but quite short. The only downside to that is that there’s no real room for a lot of red herrings. I was pleased with failing to discover the culprit too early on for most of these stories (only one exception)...

“All in all, an enjoyable mystery collection.”

Reviewer, Romania

“Rathe was a defense lawyer who decided to prosecute a case. The defendant was found guilty, sentenced, then committed suicide. After the defendant’s death, Rathe finds out the defendant was innocent. Rathe is racked by guilt and leaves the bar. He becomes a reluctant investigator. The book consists of short stories on cases he investigates, interacting with a police detective. The stories and characters are well-developed.”

Reviewer, USA

Preview of When Anthony Rathe Investigates, by Matthew Booth ISBN 9781907230684 (print), 9781907230677 (epub)

Editorial note

For readers outside the United Kingdom, the legal profession in England and Wales is divided into barristers and solicitors. Barristers are the senior branch, presenting and defending cases in the higher courts. Although self-employed, barristers work in groups from chambers and specialise, for example in criminal law.

Excerpt from *A Question of Proof*

Rathe wondered whether he had been right to insist on going there alone. Sitting in the small, windowless room, he began to feel a vulnerability which he had never experienced before. He had been in prisons in his professional capacity, but he had never felt this sense of helplessness which seemed to stir within him now. Perhaps it had been the armour of his robes and wig, or the protective shield of the legal arguments which had occupied his mind on those earlier occasions when he had set foot in such places. Perhaps now that those defences were gone, his mind had nothing to guard itself with and the fear and the horror of the compact and isolated space

could work its effect upon him. He felt the urge to stand, but he resisted it, not certain whether it would help or not. Instead, he forced his brain to focus upon his purpose here and the questions which he was compelled to ask.

The meeting had been easy to arrange. Cook had ensured that Rathe would be given a private room for his interview, that the confrontation would be outside the normal hours for visiting. It had required several phone calls, but Cook had managed to arrange things as required. Rathe had promised to update Cook as soon as he left the prison, the promise being made after a series of insistent demands from the detective. Rathe wasn't sure whether it was a result of Cook's need to know what had been said or from his hope that he would not have Rathe's harm or destruction on his conscience. Whatever it was, Cook would not confess to either, Rathe knew that, but he had given his assurances that he would call and arrange a meeting with the inspector as soon as the thing was done.

It was not until the door opened that Rathe realised he had not known what to expect. How his presence there would be received was not something to which Rathe had given any consideration. With hindsight, perhaps it was better that he had not, for it meant that he had not had time to construct scenarios in his own mind. It had left him free from any perceived preconceptions he might otherwise have formed in his head, so that when the man stepped into the room, Rathe simply rose from his chair and met the man's glare with his own. They remained staring at each other for some time before slowly sinking to their chairs.

What impressed Rathe most about Harry Mack were his eyes, small pearls of blackness so deep that there was almost no white around them. They were looking at Rathe but there was nothing in them which he might have been able to call feeling. Rathe had the impression of a shark, to such an extent that he could imagine Mack's eyes rolling back into his head whenever he went in for the kill. His hair, collar length and luxuriant with grease, was a similar colour, so black it seemed to carry a blue tint, like the tail feathers of a raven. His expression was lifeless; his face had the features of a human being but nothing in them suggested anything approaching morality or emotion. Rathe might have expected cruelty or violence to be etched on Mack's face, but he could not discern even those and, somehow, the complete impassivity of the eyes and mouth was more horrible than either of them.

“Anthony Rathe,” hissed Mack, his voice little more than whisper. “Rathe... Jimmy Morgan. You got him off when they tried to do him for Pete Beckett’s murder.”

Rathe nodded, remembering the case well enough. “I’m afraid I did.”

“He reckoned you were a magician.”

“He was wrong.” Rathe lowered his head. “And Morgan was guilty. I knew it, he knew it.”

Mack watched him, his eyes still seemingly disinterested. “Didn’t stop you getting him off.”

“That doesn’t mean I have to be proud of it.”

A slight shrug of the shoulders showed that Mack conceded the point. “I hear you jacked it all in. The court stuff. After the Marsden kid topped himself.”

Rathe bristled. “I’m not here to talk about that.”

Mack pounced, leaning forward across the table with a feral urgency. “Then why are you here?”

“Doing a favour,” Rathe said. “For a friend.”

“Who?”

“Doesn’t matter,” replied Rathe, shaking his head. “Nobody doubts you belong in here, Mack, but somebody thinks you shouldn’t be in here because of Lenny Voss.”

Now there was emotion, but it was a scornful, guttural laugh. “Tell that to Cook, the bastard.” Rathe did not reply, but he gave no indication that Cook was the reason for the two of them talking together now. To do so would have been a mistake, and Rathe was aware of it, only too keenly. Mack continued to stare across at him. “Why send you? What’s your part in all this, Mr Rathe?”

“I’m just helping a friend.”

“Sounds to me like you can’t walk away from it; from murder, from crime, from violence. No matter how hard you try, no matter how much you think you want to.”

"I don't think you're in any position to analyse me, Mack. Even if you were, I don't think it would be your business to do so."

"I could make it my business."

Rathe could feel his heart banging in protest against his show of courage. The blood screamed in his ears at his refusal to feel intimidated. And yet, something in his brain convinced him that there was nothing Mack could do to frighten him. The man was barely human, a mixture of brutality and malice rather than flesh and blood, and it seemed to Rathe that to be afraid of something barely recognisable as anything normal was in itself ridiculous. It would somehow seem like a betrayal of himself. "I'm sure you could, Mack, but it wouldn't serve any useful purpose."

That thin, humourless smile once more. "Say your piece, Rathe. I'll try to stay awake."

"The police say your motive for killing Voss was this supposed mutiny of his."

Mack snorted. "Cook's a lazy bastard. He heard that rumour and couldn't see past it."

"Was it just a rumour?"

"Lenny had got too big for his trousers, know what I mean? Yeah, he made noises which I didn't like, but I dealt with it."

"That's exactly what the police say."

Mack began to trace shapes on the table. "No, I dealt with it. Put him back in line. But I didn't kill him for it. Know why? I didn't have to."

"Why not?"

"Because I sorted it. Taught old Lenny some of the old discipline."

Rathe's mind conjured up a memory of the mortuary photographs Cook had shown him. Those bruises on Voss's chest and stomach, the injury to the left eye-socket. "You did him over."

"Standard punishment."

"For insubordination?"

“Disrespect,” corrected Mack. “Lenny was like a kid thinking he was bigger than he was. Kids need a slap to bring them back in line. Get what I’m saying?”

Rathe was barely listening. Instead, he was thinking about those bruises and, more particularly, about their implications. They had been recent abrasions, which meant that the attack had been no more than a few days before Voss’s death. If Mack had beaten Voss back into submission, it would have been too soon for Voss to attempt to break away again; if he still planned a coup, he would have waited for the dust of the first attempt to settle. Rathe’s mind went further: the beating was the end of the story as far as Mack was concerned. The disobedient child had been put back in his place, no more needed to be said about it. Either way, that beating seemed to Rathe to obviate any further action on Mack’s part in relation to Lenny Voss’s little bid for control. That, in turn, removed any backbone to the motive provided for Mack to have murdered Voss. Rathe sat back in his chair, his eyes adopting a distant glaze of deep concentration. He thought about Cook’s doubts surrounding the case and, perhaps more acutely than before, he found himself sharing them.

Mack watched the former barrister sitting motionless in the seat opposite him. The silence which had descended was brief but it seemed to the criminal that it lasted an age. He thought Rathe was staring at him, and for an instant, Mack’s natural fury began to rise in his gullet, but he realised soon enough that Rathe was seeing nothing beyond what was in his own mind. At last, Rathe looked back towards those cruel, dark eyes and appeared to remember why he was there at all.

“Frank Lovett,” murmured Rathe, “what about him?”

Mack’s head lowered, as though the name of the Newcastle monster was a source of pain for him. “Lenny screwed that up, no question about it. But don’t try to make no motive out of it.”

Rathe shook his head. “I’m not trying to.”

“What no one can get into their heads, see,” snarled Mack, “is that Lenny might have been a dumb bucket of horse piss but he was still the oldest friend I ever had. He might have needed a slap every now and again but I didn’t want his blood in my kitchen, you with me?”

“You did more than slap him.”

Mack stabbed a yellowed, grubby finger in the air. "You're not like me, Rathe. You're not like any of us. It's a game to you, that's what crime is, but for people like us it's a way of life. Survival. For them like me, it's kill or be killed. For them like you, life's a game of bridge. Civilised, cosy, safe, something you measure in champagne glasses and fillet steaks. To me, it's a fight to the end, marked out with broken bottles and shattered bones. You're sophisticated, protected by the world because it respects you for being who you are, part of the pedigree. Me? Pedigree to me is a mad dog barking in the dark. I have to earn respect and it doesn't always come cheap. It's anything from a warning kick in the ribs to a bullet in the face to keep things under control. You've no idea about any of it, because the law and rules of life mean nothing to you beyond being a game you play. So, forgive me, Rathe, if I tell you that what you understand about lives like mine isn't worth a rat's fart. You say I gave Lenny Voss more than a slap, because you measure things to a different scale to me. You do it because you can. Because life fondled you with kid gloves. Well, life kicked me in the balls with steel-capped Doc Martens. You cuddled life but I had to fight it back. Lenny too, both of us had to. So, don't you dare think you understand what I did to him. I say I gave him a slap, because that's what I did. You might think it was more because it looks like more, but to me and to Lenny, it was a telling off and we both knew he deserved it. So he got it and we moved on. If I wanted him dead because of what he did, in my own backyard or with Frank Lovett, he'd be dead and I wouldn't have bothered with any form of kicking in the first place. He'd just be dead. Gone. Done. But you don't understand that, because we don't see the world in the same way."

"I'm grateful for that," murmured Rathe, unimpressed with the speech. "But, like I said, I'm not looking at what happened with Lovett as a motive for you to murder Voss. I'm asking because I want to know about that phone call on the night of the murder."

Mack's knuckles had whitened during his tirade but now he relaxed his hands, unfolding his fingers, and he leaned back in the chair as though the air had been expelled from his body. He gave a regenerative sigh and cleared his throat quietly, almost imperceptibly, before speaking again.

"You know about the meeting with Lovett, when me and Lenny went to see him. I don't need to go over that again, right? Right. I thought Lenny had ruined any chance I might have had of doing business up North. Lovett is a major player, partnership with him would have seen me and the boys right, but after Lenny's show, it wasn't going

nowhere. So, I gave up hoping. But, out of nowhere, I got a call.”

“From Lovett himself?”

Mack mocked the idea. “People like Frank Lovett don’t do their own dialling, Rathe.”

“So why did you think the call was genuine?”

“Because this kid, whoever he was, knew all about the previous meeting. Proper details, the sort of stuff only me and Lenny and Lovett himself would have known.”

“Was anyone else at the meeting with Lovett?”

“Couple of his boys. No one else.”

“So one of them must have made the call?”

But Mack was shaking his head. “No, they were big fellas. The sort who’d block the screen if they stood up to go for a piss in the cinema, get me? No, whoever phoned me was a kid. Soft voice, bit like a girl’s. But nervy, like he wasn’t used to setting stuff up. New to it all.”

“So how could he have known what happened at the meeting, if he wasn’t there?” Rathe’s eyes had narrowed.

Mack shrugged. “The way Lenny carried on, I bet Lovett hasn’t got tired of telling the story even now. Probably told all his lads what a pair of pearly clowns dared to try and play with the big boys.”

Rathe was thinking once more, his eyes glazing over again, and his lips pursed. Something had been said which he knew was important, but it was eluding him. The more he tried to focus on it, the further away from him it drifted, like the litter on the breeze or a dream in the waking hours of dawn. “So, you believed the call and you drove straight up there, to Newcastle?”

“Too good an opportunity to miss.”

“Even though the call had been made in London?”

“I didn’t know that, did I?” hissed Mack.

Rathe paused. "And you thought it wise to go alone?"

Mack sniffed with derision. "Wasn't risking taking Lenny, was I?"

"Who knew you were going? Who knew about the call?"

A swipe of the criminal's hand emphasised the reply. "Not a soul. Didn't tell nobody."

Rathe cocked his head. "No one expected you to be anywhere else?"

"Had to cancel a date with a bird, but nothing else. Didn't tell her why."

"Didn't she ask?"

Mack's grin turned into a leer. "What they don't know don't hurt them, Rathe. Treat them like they deserve, get me?"

Rathe felt the bitter aftertaste of disgust at the back of his throat. "Who is this lady you left stranded, Mack? Anyone in particular?"

The yellow fingers drummed against the table. "Gentlemen never tell, yeah? It's called loyalty. And she's nothing to do with any of this, because she didn't know nothing about Lovett. She's nobody, just someone to help me unwind, know what I'm saying?"

"One of many, Mack?"

"Variety is the spice."

Suddenly, Rathe had every desire to be somewhere else. Somewhere whose air wasn't tainted by deceit, decay, and death. Somewhere, anywhere, where Harry Mack hadn't walked and had the opportunity to foul. He rose from the table and made for the door.

"I hope you're not the spice of the month in here, Mack," he said, unafraid and unaffected by the possibility of any physical comeback from the criminal.

There was no physical reprisal. Instead, Mack rose from the table and favoured Rathe with a crooked grin of spite. "More into the likes of you, I reckon, Mr Rathe."

"Goodbye, Mack."

"Before you go, Rathe... "

Rathe turned back to face him. He looked into the eyes of the shark once more, wondering about those lives Mack had ruined, the lives he had taken, and the damage he had done to the people who crossed his path. He thought about Shelly Voss and her fears for her son, the circle of violence which already seemed to be whirling around the boy. He thought about the countless other boys for whom pedigree would become that mad dog in the dark and for whom respect would be a kick in the ribs, or a bullet in the face.

“What is it, Mack?”

“Just one more question.”

“Ask it quickly.”

“Aren’t you going to let me know what you say to this mate of yours, the one who sent you here?”

Rathe could hear those mad dogs barking. “No, I’m not.”

* * *

“You should have told him it was me who sent you,” said Cook.

“I didn’t think he should have had that to use against you.”

It was early evening, the time when people without murder in their lives begin to think about an evening meal. They were sitting in Rathe’s house, expensively but subtly furnished, not ornate enough for Cook to worry about breaking anything but elite enough for him to be unable to consider it a home. Music was playing low in the background, a classical piece which Cook only knew as Mahler because the digital display on the music system told him it was. Cook had accepted a bottle of Italian lager, refusing the offer of a glass, and Rathe sat across from him in a luxuriant armchair with a glass of Burgundy. It had taken Rathe less than ten minutes to bring Cook up to date with the interview with Mack.

“You think I’m right then?” Cook said. “He didn’t do it?”

Rathe sipped the wine. “Well, if he did, it wasn’t for the reason put forward at the trial. I think both Mack and Voss, and all those associated with them, thought the beating was an end to the mutiny idea of Voss’s. At least for the time being.”

Cook was nodding. "And it couldn't be the Lovett fiasco. If Mack wanted Voss dead because of that, it would have happened that day, minutes after they were embarrassed out of Lovett's office."

"Yes, I thought that myself," conceded Rathe. "And there was no reason for Mack to think Voss had sent him on the wild goose chase to Newcastle, so he couldn't retaliate against him for that, either. Besides, Mack said the voice on the phone had been a young kid. Nervy, he said, softly spoken. Does that sound like Lenny Voss?"

"Not much," said Cook. "Doesn't sound much like anyone I'd put with Frank Lovett either."

"Perhaps not," said Rathe, but it was almost to himself rather than in any formal reply to the inspector.

Cook drank some of the lager. "If we're leaning towards Mack being innocent of Voss's murder, we have to accept that it was him driving his car on that night. That he hadn't lent it to some lackey for the sake of an alibi. Don't we?"

"I think so."

Cook leaned forward, warming to his theme. "Right, then, so Mack wouldn't have had time to do in Voss. By the time Voss was murdered, Mack was being caught on CCTV in his own motor chasing wild geese up the M1."

Rathe drank some wine with a smile. "It's good to know we're thinking along similar lines for once."

"I was never happy about that bloody car thing." Cook's words were spoken quietly, but no more forcefully because of it. "Goes to show I should always trust my instinct."

Rathe's gaze lowered. "It was a farce. The whole trial was a circus. When all this started, we talked about justice being blind. Perhaps she should always be blind, but she should never be stupid. You were right, Cook. People wanted Mack off the streets at any cost. It was never a question of proof. It was simply a question of convenience."

"It wasn't only justice which failed. It was me." Cook's eyes were staring ahead of him, blended with rage and regret. He stood up and paced towards the fireplace, as though he felt the confession would come more easily to him if he was moving. "I've been

doing this for twenty years, give or take. I've never once knowingly done it wrong. Always tried to do the right thing, to get the result which meant the system could do its job. Never put away someone I didn't know was guilty; never once pursued someone I didn't think was guilty. Not till now. The Lanyon case was different. I believed Nicholas Barclay killed Richard Temple. But when you showed me I was wrong, I accepted it, didn't I? And we got it right in the end. But this time, I was wrong. I knew there were holes in that case, I knew the defence team weren't pulling their weight, and I even knew the Judge didn't give much of a shit as long as Mack was put away. I knew all that and I just went with it. That makes me as bad as them."

Rathe stood up and moved next to Cook. They stood staring out of the French windows, across the expanse of lawn which stretched out into the fading sunlight. "It's not your fault."

"Isn't it, Rathe?"

"You weren't in charge of the enquiry, Cook. You didn't bring the prosecution's case, and you're not Mack's defence team, let alone the jury. It went wrong, yes, but not because of you and you alone."

Cook looked across at his companion. "And was Kevin Marsden because of you and you alone?"

The name, once more, struck Rathe's heart like a knife and he felt the glands in his throat tighten with the nausea of guilt. "Yes, I think so."

Cook drained his bottle. "Then you know how I feel, don't you?"

Rathe turned slowly to face the inspector. "Point taken."

"I told you I didn't want to turn into you because of Harry Mack."

Rathe's eyes glinted. "Then you have to do something about it. You have to find out what really happened and put it right. Through the correct processes. That's what you have to do."

"Can we do that?"

"Of course you can."

“No, Rathe, can we do that?”

And Rathe now recognised it for the plea it was, for the request for help that it had been, the unexpected display of vulnerability from Cook took him by surprise. He found himself nodding his agreement, not daring to speak in case his chosen words were misguided and he belittled the humility of the moment. Cook acknowledged the agreement with his own bow of the head and they turned back to look out over the lawns, allowing the shift in their relationship, however brief or understated it had been, to settle.

* * *

The girl eyed them both with suspicion, but it was for Cook that she reserved the majority of her dislike. She was young, barely in her twenties in Rathe’s estimation, but the heavy make-up made it difficult to be sure. Her hair was bleached blonde, a longer and straighter version of Monroe; whilst the peroxide matched the paleness of the skin, it contrasted starkly with the heightened darkness of the lashes and the livid crimson of the lips. Beneath it all, Rathe thought she might have been naturally pretty; certainly, despite the harshness of her stare, the eyes were a delicate shade of green which he thought he could never remember seeing before, and the lips were naturally full beneath their clown-like adornment. The falsity of her cosmetics was all the more gaudy next to the natural beauty which lay beneath it.

“Tell me why I should say anything to you, Cook,” she spat as he placed a Bacardi and Coke in front of her. “After you bloody well framed my Harry for murder. A right victim of yours, my Harry is.”

He pointed to the drink. “Because I didn’t frame him. And because that cost me a packet, Carla, and you don’t often get to go to places like this.”

She looked around the cocktail bar. “Nothing special. Harry takes me to places like this all the time. And he owns them all.”

Cook raised a glass of whisky to his lips. “That right? Well, like I said, you don’t get to go to places like this often. Because this one, see, is legitimate.”

“You’ve always been a bastard, Cook,” spat the girl.

“You’re not old enough to know that for sure, Carla, so tell your mouth to drown its

bullshit with some Bacardi.”

It was later that same night. It had been after they had begun to go back over Mack’s interview with Rathe that Cook had thought about Carla. It had been Rathe’s comment about Mack standing up a girl in order to drive to Newcastle. Cook had known who Mack’s current piece of meat was and they had sought her out without any difficulty.

“There’s been loads of Carla Malones in the past,” Cook had told Rathe, “and there’ll be a load more in the future. Mack gets bored easily. Once he’s satisfied himself with one girl, he moves on. To him, it’s a business transaction rather than an emotional one.”

“Don’t any of them retaliate?” Rathe had asked.

“A girl retaliate against Harry Mack?” Cook had replied, the tone of his voice pouring scorn on the idea.

“So, what happens to the girls when Mack’s had enough?”

“What do you think? If they can still earn money for him, he puts them back where he found them. The streets. Assuming they’re lucky enough not to have bored him or upset him so much that he has them put in the ground or underwater instead.”

“And if they can’t earn any more?” Rathe had asked, hardly needing to hear the answer.

“Depends. If they didn’t upset him but they can’t work, they’ll be plied with drink and drugs and told to enjoy themselves. Within two months, they won’t recognise themselves or remember what got them on smack in the first place.”

Rathe had remained silent for some time. “This Carla, she was from the streets?”

“Since she was fourteen. And she’ll outstay her welcome soon enough, believe me.”

Cook had known Carla would be in one of Mack’s bars, because she was almost never seen anywhere else. She wouldn’t let an inconvenience like Mack’s imprisonment get in the way of her enjoying free drinks on the sole basis that she was invited into the criminal’s bed every night. Mack wouldn’t have minded her being out without him either, Cook knew that. If she was in one of Mack’s clubs, he would have loyal eyes on her and any one of the punters would know who she was. There was no danger of her doing anything she shouldn’t as long as she stayed in one of Mack’s places, so he could

rest easy. Which is why it had been difficult for Rathe and Cook to prise her away. In the end, it had been Cook's threat of arrest which had done it. He didn't care: there would be no reprisals if what Carla could tell them would help get Mack out. As he thought it, Cook felt a twist of repulsion in his stomach at the filthy obligation he felt on account of his personal instincts and conscience. The things he felt he had to do just so he could sleep at night.

Carla took a long drink, her eyes bulging at the taste. "Jesus, that's more than a double, isn't it?"

"No," drawled Cook, "but it's not watered down like Harry's probably is. So drink it slowly."

"Fuck off," she spat.

Rathe felt it was time to intervene. "Miss Malone, I think it's probably best if we don't take up too much of each other's time. It's pretty clear that none of us wants this interview to last longer than it has to."

She looked at him initially with the same glare of contempt which she had reserved for Cook, but his voice changed her expression and those green eyes became warmer. "I don't often hear men talk like you. Lovely, it is."

Despite himself, Rathe felt his cheeks glow and the hairs on his neck rose slightly. "There are just a few questions we'd like to ask," he said with an embarrassed grin.

"You could recite the bloody drinks menu and I'd get it on me," she drooled with a short, sharp cackle. "I bet you sound right seductive on the phone."

Cook hissed. "You wouldn't know what to do with him unless he slapped you about a bit first, Carla, so lay off."

The warmth in her eyes froze over once more. "I told you to fuck off, didn't I?"

This time, Rathe slammed the table with the palm of his hand. "You can both do that if you're going to go on like this. We're here with a common goal and that's to get the truth about what happened to Lenny Voss so that we can help Harry Mack. We can't do that if we're going to end up in the playground every time one of you speaks."

For a moment, it occurred to Carla that she might be able to make a joke about the

eroticism of Rathe's fury, but she thought against it. His eyes had grown darker and his lips had tightened into a taught whipcord of anger. She looked across at Cook, who was now drinking to hide his own abasement, and she decided that whoever this man, Rathe, was, he ought to be kept on side. She had never seen Terry Cook cut down so quickly and so effectively before.

"All right," she replied. "Say what you've got to say and let me go."

Rathe took his time in formulating his questions. The bass line of the music of the bar drummed in his head and he seemed to be hearing it for the first time, as though his outburst had somehow awakened his senses, as if his explosion of anger had broken apart all the jumbled facts of the case in his head and now they were falling back into their correct places in time to that incessant, banging rhythm. And, in that moment, he thought he saw with the sharpest clarity to date, the truth behind the murder of Lenny Voss.

He became aware of them both staring at him and he realised that he must look like a simple child, unable to form words but making every effort to do so. "You were due to meet Harry on the night of Voss's murder, is that right?"

Carla nodded. "He was meant to be taking me to his new restaurant. Not even opened yet, but Harry wanted me to have the first meal ever cooked there. He's cute like that."

"I wouldn't say cute," Cook felt compelled to say.

Rathe ignored him. "What reason did he say for changing his plans?"

"Business," shrugged Carla, as though there was never any other reason for a change in Harry Mack's plans. "Something came up, something urgent."

"Did he say what?"

"No. Never does."

"So you have no idea what this urgent meeting was about?"

Carla rolled her eyes. "I've said, haven't I?"

"Weren't you angry, though?"

"A bit," she purred, "if I'm honest. I was looking forward to my dinner for one thing."

Rathe leaned forward. "And for another thing...?"

Carla's eyes drifted from his to her glass, but the battle was short lived and Rathe's intense stare won the war. "Maybe I didn't like what sort of business Harry was talking about."

Cook sneered. "You know what sort of business Mack's into, Carla."

Rathe was smiling, but his eyes were filled with a dark understanding. "She doesn't mean business for money. Do you, Carla? You mean business for pleasure." A pause. "Who was she?"

Carla began to pick at one of her scarlet, false nails. "I don't know."

"But you have suspicions?" pressed Rathe.

"Sort of."

A TASTE FOR BLOOD – PRIVATE DETECTIVE

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characterization. So good were these that it encouraged me to read the novel a second time.

“I had not read any of David Stuart Davies but now am eagerly waiting his next titles. Comparisons may be made with other novels in this genre such as *Silence of the Lambs* but Davies has produced a work that whilst being less extreme becomes more fearful through its naturalness.

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“Even though this was the sixth novel in the series it can be read as a stand-alone, forming an intriguing double set of mysteries. I enjoyed the hunt for the serial killer more than that of Hawke’s suicide case, so I think it might have been better if the book focused on one case rather than two. Nevertheless, both mysteries are wrapped up with a nerve-wracking conclusion that will have you on edge until it’s resolved. The murderer is truly chilling, definitely not for the faint-hearted.”

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“Interesting mystery that takes place in the 1930’s in England. Private Investigator Johnny Hawke is investigating a suicide that seems off and his police buddy, Detective David Llewellyn is investigating a bloody crime involving an escaped convict and a psychiatrist. The two stories merge for a twisted ending. The details are grisly and the main villain enjoys his victims just a bit too much. But other than that, it was a good story with an unpredictable ending – just how I like my mysteries.

“Although this is the sixth Johnny Hawke novel, you can read it and understand it without reading the previous books. Enough background is given so that you know who Johnny is.”

Donna Miller, Librarian, USA

“‘A Taste For Blood’ is set in 1940s, London, during World War Two, and features two characters that fans of the author will have met before - Detective Inspector David Llewellyn of the Metropolitan Police and Private Detective, Johnny Hawke. As this is the first time I had encountered any novels by David Stuart Davies, I had no knowledge of these two characters. However, this did not affect my enjoyment of this

crime novel.

“There are two storylines to the book, one in which we meet a particularly horrible villain who had previously been caught by D. I. Llewellyn and incarcerated for eight years before his escape. He is a ghoulish character, who is determined to imprint himself on the world in a very unpleasant manner. The other storyline concerns Johnny Hawke’s investigation of a suspicious suicide. Both cases touch each other at intervals throughout the book, as David Llewellyn and Johnny Hawke are friends - this friendship plays an important part in the last part of book.

“I enjoyed ‘A Taste for Blood’. It was rather gruesome in parts, but the violence was not gratuitous. I particularly liked the way in which the author used words and phrases which resonated with me. They reminded me of films and novels written in the 40s and 50s, giving the novel an authentic period feel. I had no idea how these intertwined plots would resolve themselves and was kept guessing until the end.

“I shall certainly search out some more of David Stuart Davies’ work, starting, I think, with the first book featuring Johnny Hawke.”

Angela Thomas, Reviewer, UK

“I didn’t really want this story to end. I didn’t know how it was going to end, and I just loved that feeling. Too often can you predict what’s going to happen in a book, but A Taste For Blood? Nope. You can’t. It keeps you in the dark until the very end.

“First take a look at the cover. It’s dark and twisted and broody and makes me think of Jack the Ripper, a world awash with blood.

“I love crime books, I probably read one each week, but I didn’t think this would be my cup of tea. How wrong I was.

“The narrative switches between a few different characters in this book, but that didn’t bother me at all. All of the characters had their own strong voice, their own mannerisms with language which made them stand apart from each other.

“The characters are really very British, so there’s an abundance of tea - and we all know how I love my tea.

“I grinned. ‘I’m anybody’s for a cuppa and a biscuit.’

"I could relate to the characters. Well, most of them. Not really Sexton or Northcote. Although I did understand Northcote's motives towards the end. My favourite character to read was probably David Llewellyn.

"This book twists and turns so unexpectedly that I re-read more than a few sections, just to make sure I'd taken it all in properly. It's gruesome and violent and more than once my toes curled. It's horrific in the way that all good crime should be, with blood and gore everywhere and enough mystery to keep you, as a reader, on your toes..."

Cora Linn Ballantine, Reviewer, UK

Preview of A Taste for Blood, by David Stuart Davies ISBN 9781907230462 (print), 9781907230486 (epub)

PROLOGUE

He would never forget the blood. It wasn't just the quantity – although there was a great deal of it collected in dark, shining, sticky pools on the stone floor with errant rivulets escaping down the grooves between the flagstones. It wasn't just that sweet sickly smell either, which assailed his nostrils with pungent ferocity and etched itself forever on his memory, or the crimson stains splattered on the walls and floor that had remained with him, to return at the midnight hour to haunt his dreams. Most of all it was that face, that crazed visage with mad bulbous eyes and chomping teeth. Revisiting the scene in his nightmares, these images seem to shift and spread like a living organism coagulating into one great patch of red and then from the crimson mist the giant mouth would appear ready to swallow him up.

At this juncture, he would jerk himself awake with a brief tortured sigh, his body drenched in sweat. 'Just a silly nightmare,' he would murmur to placate his concerned wife Sheila and pat her shoulder reassuringly. 'Just a silly nightmare.'

Almost ten years later, the nightmares still came. Not as often but the images were still as vibrant, as threatening, as horrific as ever. He never talked about them to anyone, not even Sheila. They were his personal burdens and he was determined that they should remain so. He certainly didn't want to reveal his secret to his colleagues and have some brain doctor try to analyse his disturbed psyche. Besides if it got out that Detective Inspector David Llewellyn was being scared witless by bad dreams it would hardly do much for his police career. So, with typical stoical reserve, his 'silly

nightmares' remained private and self contained.

Until...

ONE

1935

The night was bitterly cold and the frosty lawn shimmered like a silver carpet in the bright moonlight. Concealed in the shrubbery, Detective Sergeant David Llewellyn gazed at the dark and silent house some fifty yards away. His body was stiff with apprehension and fear while his bowels churned with nervous tension. He knew he shouldn't be here. He knew he was taking a risk. He knew he was following his heart rather than his head. But he also knew that sometimes one had to take risks to achieve the right result.

The house, Hawthorn Lodge, gothic and imposing, appeared as a black threatening silhouette against the lighter star-studded sky. It rose out of the earth like a giant claw, its gables and chimneys scratching the sky, while its windows glistened darkly in the moonlight. There was no observable sign of life or occupancy and yet Llewellyn knew that there was some one in there: Doctor Ralph Northcote.

No doubt he was in his basement, a section of the house that the doctor had successfully kept secret from the officers when they had searched the premises. What he was doing there? Llewellyn preferred not to think about it at that moment. His boss, Inspector Sharples, a whisker off retirement, was a tired and sloppy officer and had not been thorough or dogged enough in his investigations. Llewellyn had been sure that a house as large as Hawthorn Lodge would have quarters below ground – a wine and keeping cellar at least – but Sharples wasn't interested. He was convinced that the arrogant and smarmy Dr Ralph Northcote was in no way associated with the terrible crimes he was investigating. How could a man of such intelligence, refinement and breeding perpetrate such horrible murders? The fiend who slaughtered those women was an animal, a beast, a creature of the gutter, not a respectable and respected medical man. Or so the blinkered, forelock tugging Inspector believed.

David Llewellyn had other ideas.

To satisfy his curiosity – at least – he had visited the local solicitor's office where he had been able to examine the original plans for Hawthorn Lodge. To his delight and satisfaction he had discovered that, as he suspected, the house did have a series of cellars. The plans indicated that these chambers were accessed by an entrance in the kitchen. However, instead of passing this information on to his superior, Llewellyn had decided to carry out some undercover work of his own. Why should he allow the old duffer Sharples take the credit for his detective prowess? He'd been sneered at and ridiculed when he'd offered his opinion, his strong conviction, that Dr Northcote was the man they were after.

Now he intended to prove it.

Gripping the police revolver in his pocket with one hand and picking up his battered canvas bag with the other, David Llewellyn emerged from the shrubbery and with a measured tread made his way across the lawn towards the front of the house, his footsteps leaving dark imprints in the frosted grass like the trail of some ghostly creature. On reaching one of the tall sitting-room windows, he knelt down in the flowerbed and withdrew a jemmy from the bag. With several deft movements, accompanied by the gentle sound of splintering wood, he managed to prise the window from its fastenings and open it a few inches. That was all that was needed. Gripping the lower edge of the window with both hands and exerting all his strength he pushed it higher, creating an aperture large enough to allow him to pass through.

Within moments he was in the house, a gentle smile of satisfaction resting on his taut features. From the innards of the bag, he extracted a torch. He had visited the house on two previous occasions in a formal and more conventional capacity with Sharples. These visits, allied to his studies of the plans, gave him the confidence to move swiftly through the dark sitting room, into the hallway and towards the kitchen.

* * *

The murders had started six months earlier. The pattern was the same in all four cases. A young woman in her early twenties was reported missing by her distraught parents and then a few days later her mutilated body was discovered in woodland or waste ground. In all instances the victim's arms, legs and breasts had been amputated and were missing. There was also evidence that the victim had been tortured. Most of the gruesome details had been held back from the press but despite that, because of

the youth of the victims, the murderer had been labelled 'The Ghoul' by the more downmarket rags.

The limbs had been expertly severed and so it was suspected that a member of the medical profession was the perpetrator of these horrendous crimes. The girls had all lived within five miles of Hampstead Heath and doctors and surgeons residing within this radius had fallen under particular scrutiny. Two suspects emerged: Stanley Prince, a middle-aged GP who had been struck off the medical register some years before for conducting a series of abortions; and Ralph Northcote, a surgeon at St Luke's Hospital who twelve months earlier had been accused of assault by one of the nurses who had mysteriously disappeared before she could testify against him at a medical tribunal. As a result, the case was dropped and Northcote continued to practise.

Inspector Brian Sharples was placed in charge of the case and given one of the promising new live wires at the Yard, Detective Sergeant David Llewellyn, as his assistant. The two men did not get on. Sharples was an old hand, steady on the tiller, a great believer in doing things by the book, a book it seemed to Llewellyn that Sharples had written himself at some time back in the Middle Ages. With Sharples it was a case of softly, softly, catchee monkey. This may work in the long run, thought Llewellyn, but there may be three or four more murders before this particular monkey was apprehended. Llewellyn was a great believer in stirring up the waters and in the power of intuition. He was convinced that he had a nose for sniffing out a murderer.

Both Prince and Northcote were investigated and interviewed, but apart from their past misdemeanours nothing could be pinned on them. However, Llewellyn did not like Northcote. There was something about his oh-so- charming and rather slimy manner that set alarm bells ringing for the young Detective Sergeant. So much so that, unknown to Sharples, and any other of his colleagues, he had started to do a little digging on his own. Northcote was now in his mid-thirties and living alone, but in his youth he had been a bit of a ladies' man with, Llewellyn discovered, a string of broken engagements. Engagements which had all been ended by the girls. Llewellyn had managed to track one of these girls down and interview her. Doreen French was touching forty now, plump and comfortable looking. She had married a greengrocer and was the mother of twins. She seemed content with her lot and more than happy to talk about Northcote. She revealed nothing that was legally incriminating, but

confirmed Llewellyn's impression that the man was odd and put up a false front to the world. 'In the end,' said Doreen French, her eyes twinkling brightly, 'he gave me the willies. He was... how can I say...? He liked to touch me. Not in a sexual way, you understand, but... just to touch my skin. He loved to run his fingers down my bare arm. He once gave my arm such a squeeze, it caused a great big bruise. He wasn't much of a kisser, but ...' she giggled innocently... 'he did like to lick me. On my cheek and round the back of the neck. I thought it was sweet at first. Affectionate like – but in the end... as I say, it gave me the willies'.

Llewellyn nodded sympathetically. It would give him the willies too. 'Was he ever violent to you?'

Doreen did not have to ponder this one. 'Oh, no. Not deliberately, anyway. There was that bruise I mentioned, but he never slapped me or anything like that. But I have to say, that towards the end, I just didn't like being alone with him. He just seemed odd. What had started out as endearing quirks became rather spooky. And his eating habits... ugh!'

'What about them?'

'Well, he hardly ate anything that was cooked. He liked raw steak and his lamb chops hardly sat in the pan a minute before they were on his plate, all bloody and raw.' Doreen pulled a face that effectively mirrored her revulsion.

Well, thought David, there was nothing in the interview that would provide evidence that Northcote was this Ghoul, but he certainly seemed a strange chap and it was certainly a strange chap with medical knowledge who was murdering these young girls. Now a fifth one had disappeared. Her body had not been found yet so there was a slim chance that she was still alive. Very slim, he had to admit. Sharples had refused to interview Northcote again – 'We've nothing to go on, lad. We're here to investigate crimes not cause a nuisance to respectable law abiding folk.' And so David decided to take things into his own hands.

* * *

Once in the kitchen, he examined the walls carefully for some kind of hidden door that would provide access to the cellars. His search was fruitless, however. As he stood in the centre of the lofty chamber, the beam of his torch slowly scanning his

surroundings, a sound came to his ears, one which froze his blood.

It was a high-pitched scream of pain. It was sharp and piercing like nails down a blackboard. He shuddered involuntarily at the sound. Where had it come from? It was clear yet distant, like a train whistle down a long tunnel. He listened, straining his ears in the hissing silence but the sound did not come again. As he waited in the dark, he relaxed the hold on his torch and the shaft of light sank towards the floor and rested on the base of a large kitchen cabinet by the far wall. What it illuminated made Llewellyn's heart skip a beat. There were faint skid marks marking the dark wooden flooring: tiny grooves that had imprinted themselves on the boards. It was quite clear to Llewellyn that these had been made by the stout legs of the cabinet as it had been pulled away from the wall.

With a tight grin, he rested the torch on the large kitchen table in the centre of the room so that the beam fell on to the cabinet and then he attempted to drag it away from the wall. Kneeling in order to obtain a more secure purchase, he tugged hard at the lower section. Slowly the cabinet moved, the feet following exactly the track of the grooves in the floor. When he had managed to create a gap between the wall and the cabinet big enough for him to squeeze himself into, he saw it.

Llewellyn's grin broadened. 'The secret door,' he whispered to himself.

He now pushed the cabinet fully clear of the wall and attempted to open the door. The handle rattled encouragingly but the door did not budge. It was locked. This did not daunt Llewellyn for although the lock was new and stout, the door was old. Retrieving the jemmy from his canvas bag, he got to work levering the door open. It was the work of a matter of moments. The wood splintered easily and surrendered to the force of the jemmy.

Gingerly he pulled the door open and with the aid of his torch he peered into the darkness beyond. There was a set of stone steps leading down into ebony void. 'Now the adventure really starts,' he muttered to himself as he moved slowly forward into the cold blackness. On reaching the bottom of the stairs he thought he heard faint, indistinguishable noises in the distance. How far away they were he could not tell. Maybe it was just the movement of rats and mice – maybe it was something else. Using his torch like a searchlight, he tried to get a sense of his surroundings. He was in a passageway with a low vaulted ceiling. He saw that there were two light bulbs

dangling down but no sign of a switch by which to turn them on. He knew, however, that it would be foolish to do so even if he could. He had no intention of announcing his presence in such an ostentatious fashion.

On reaching the end of the passage, he came to another door. A thin line of light seeped out at its base. This is it, thought Llewellyn, heart thumping. Swiftly he clicked off the torch and stowed it away in his coat pocket and then pulled out his revolver before turning the handle of the door. This one was not locked. Gently he opened it and stepped inside. The first impression was of the brightness of the chamber. The walls and floor were covered in white ceramic tiles while fierce strip lights hung down from the ceiling flooding the room with harsh illumination which created dense shadows. It had the antiseptic ambience of an operating theatre.

An operating theatre.

In the centre of the room was a stone slab on which was laid the twitching naked body of a young girl. At first glance, she seemed to be coated from head to foot in some dark shiny substance. Then, to Llewellyn's horror, he realised that it was blood. Leaning over her was a man in a white coat which was also splattered with crimson stains. As Llewellyn entered the chamber the man glanced up in surprise, his eyes wide and manic. It was a moment that was forever etched on David's mind. Like a scar, that image was to stay with him for life; it was seared into his consciousness ready to feed his nightmares and catch him unawares during unsuspecting waking moments. It was as though a fierce flashbulb had exploded, the harsh, vibrant light freezing the scene as vile photograph.

The creature seemed unconcerned that he had been disturbed in his activity. The lower half of his face was dripping with blood and something seemed to be trailing from his mouth, glistening and moist. As Llewellyn took a step nearer, he realised to his disgust that it was a piece of pink meat. Instinctively, his gaze moved to the mutilated body of the naked girl and then the truth hit him like a mighty blow to the solar plexus. This fiend was eating her flesh.

A Taste for Blood is also available in an omnibus edition, *Three British Mystery Novels* ISBN 9781907230738 (print), 9781907230745 (epub)

WOMEN'S FICTION

Please also see *The Sicilian Woman's Daughter*, which is only available as an e-book

THE ELOQUENCE OF DESIRE –HISTORICAL ROMANCE

The Eloquence of Desire explores the conflicts in family relationships caused by obsessive love, the lost innocence of childhood and the terror of the 1950s Communist insurgency in Malaya.

Richly descriptive and well-researched, the story told by Amanda Sington-Williams unfolds as George is posted to the tropics in punishment for an affair with the daughter of his boss. His wife, Dorothy, constrained by social norms, begrudgingly accompanies him while their twelve year old daughter Susan is packed off to boarding school.

Desire and fantasy mix with furtive visits, lies and despair to turn the family inside out with Dorothy becoming a recluse, George taking a new lover, and Susan punishing herself through self harm.

The Eloquence of Desire is written in Sington-Williams' haunting and rhythmical prose.

Reviews

"For those who know me, giving a book a 5 is something I don't do. My belief is if a book receives a 5 rating, it better be worthy of a Nobel Prize in literature. The *Eloquence of Desire* is one such book. Ms. Sington-Williams has written a book that flows rhythmically, lyrically, like poetry or a song, but touches on every facet of human nature.

"This is not an easy read. Filled with emotion and every facet of human nature laid bare before the reader, this story will grip your heart and bring your emotions to the foreground. I don't think anyone will come away from this story untouched."

Rie McGaha, Romance Writers United

"Wow! Amazing novel..."

Ana Carter, Reviewer, Canada

"I grew up in Singapore and Malaysia in the 1950s. This book evoked a whole world of sights, smells and sounds. It captured the fear and uncertainty of the times and the very needed stiff upper lips. I recall vividly traveling from Singapore to Ipoh in an armored car and stopping at each armed checked post. Other than that, this was an engrossing read and extremely well done. I found my book club recommendation for this year!"

Genene Cote, Reviewer, USA

"Set in the 1950s, *The Eloquence of Desire* follows the disintegration of a marriage and combines it with the heady descriptions of life in Ipoh, in Malaya. At the start of the novel we are made aware that George is being punished for an extra marital dalliance with the Boss's daughter, by being sent abroad. George's wife Dorothy does not wish to accompany him, but for the sake of propriety she agrees to leave their daughter Susan behind at boarding school in England, and goes with George. What then follows is the story of deception, infidelity and heartache.

"The story is well written and certainly maintains interest throughout with some creative descriptions of life in the tropics. The boredom and languor of the 1950's colonial experience is captured as is the political unrest ... I didn't really warm to the characters except maybe for Susan, who was I think badly treated by both her family, and life in general.

Josie Barton, Reviewer, UK

"I have just stumbled onto the nicest surprise"

Susan Abraham

"an atmospheric novel with thought provoking themes"

Bookish Magpie

"A good read"

Book Pleasures

Chapter 1

The tube rattled and shook. A punishing series of jerks swung George round into awkward, precarious positions as he clung onto a strap. The light bulb above his head flickered and swayed; the crossword clues jumped. Newspaper clutched in one hand, he took to watching his fellow commuters, observing their untroubled, ritualised state. At Chalk Farm, several seats were vacated; he squeezed past a man just about to deposit his mackintosh on the seat beside him. Their knees collided. They grunted apologies, acknowledgements; the other man resumed reading his paper. George lit a cigarette. Would he really miss this journey to and from work? Inconceivable to believe that this was the last time he would travel from a respectable job in the City. But he enjoyed this irksome form of travel: the daily struggle to find a seat, the jostling, the intimacy of strangers' bodies - a constant source of jocular comments with the secretaries when he finally arrived at work. Besides, the journey gave him a feeling of belonging, of fitting into place. Now, he would be left to flail, aimless, purposeless, without status or recognition. Exactly in fact what Moorcroft had in mind when he made his decision, when he chose the penalty for his employee; one that would mean there was no risk of them meeting again. George thought of Moorcroft's flattened tone, the anger held in, zipped up behind the doughy features. The plans for George's future in the firm useless, discarded, his place taken by a nodding, cheerful young man.

He watched the newly arrived commuters as they stepped into the carriage, pushed their way down the tube, the odours from their damp clothes mingling, giving off varying degrees of mustiness: London grime, or smoke from airless offices. A woman wearing a blue swing coat glanced along the carriage, casting around for an empty seat. Her pale skin, the searching green eyes, reminded him of Emma. Briefly, he felt his breath catch; he stood, clambered back over his neighbour and indicated for her to take his seat. And so his mind stayed with Emma when he knew he should be working out a strategy for telling Dorothy his news. But Emma was never far away; like the glitter balls in dance halls, she would slowly rotate in his memory, different facets reappearing, as the hues changed in her auburn hair.

The tube had come above ground; it continued to roar along the track, as if desperate for this newly found fresh air. Finally, it stopped at Golders Green. George stepped out on the icy platform, buttoned his coat and started the walk home. But he took his time, ignoring the freezing temperature that was numbing the blood in his veins.

When he stood with his hand on the gate latch, he could not stop his hands shaking. Studying the house, he tried to calculate Dorothy's mood. There was a time when she would instinctively know when he was outside the house, the front door would open, a smile would welcome him in. He made his way up the path and stamping his feet on the doorstep, remained, fighting the impulse to turn and run. His fingers gripped and turned the key. No point in delaying further. He pushed the door open and stood on the mat, puddles forming at his feet. Not that he could be blamed for that, or the snow which he would soon be treading into the carpet.

"Darling," he said, when Dorothy appeared. "Sorry I'm a bit late."

"I was beginning to wonder....," she began.

She hung his coat and umbrella under the stairs, put his briefcase in the corner; everything as normal, routines maintained. Had she forgotten about his meeting with Moorcroft this afternoon? Or was this simply her way of coping?

Bending forward he went to kiss her on the cheek. The pleasure he felt when she turned her face towards him gave him renewed strength; a hurdle had been cleared. He followed her into the sitting room, watching her skirt ripple round her legs as she walked quickly across the carpet. Standing with his back to her, he poured out two sherries. Suitable ways of telling her ran through his mind; he wondered whether the letter in his pocket had become sodden and illegible, the message completely destroyed. He should have planned this moment more efficiently, now he did not know how to tell her, had not considered how to soften the impact of his news.

"What did Moorcroft say?" She was sitting on the leatherette sofa, her legs crossed neatly at the ankles, the toe of her black pump tapping the carpet.

Absurd of him to think she had forgotten, even momentarily. She extracted a cigarette from a packet and stared at him expectantly.

"You know that my firm has contacts all over the Far East?"

She nodded, placed her lit cigarette in a glass ashtray, where it balanced uncertainly. She rolled the beads of her necklace between finger and thumb. The smoke rose in twirls from her cigarette; she watched it deliberately, studying the patterns with wide eyes, waiting. It appeared to George she had not made the connection, did not think this fact relevant to their future.

He slid along the sofa towards her. "Moorcroft has found a new position for me in Malaya. A town called Ipoh. Export business." Done, he had told her. His shoulders slackened. A hand was placed on her knee. "Sorry," he said. "I'm truly sorry for..." She removed his hand and stood.

"Malaya!"

He could almost follow the trace of blood departing from her face.

"Malaya," she repeated. "Abroad. I've never been abroad before. No." She retrieved her smouldering cigarette from the ashtray, inhaled deeply, started to cough, moved unsteadily to the bay window. "No," she said again.

Swallowing hard, George kept his eyes on the bars of the electric fire, glowing like the devil he felt was in him. All he could think of saying now was the repeated apology.

"When? What about Susan?" She was standing over him now. "Can't he get you something different? Here?"

He shook his head, tried to touch her hand before it was snatched away. "I've got a letter."

The contents were memorised, but he extracted the letter from his pocket, unfolded the crumpled paper. "We have to leave quite soon. The boat departs on the tenth of January."

She stretched her hand out. He should have bought that box of Milk Tray, for once bypass his dislike for queues with dilly-dallying females, loitering, chatting to the shop-keepers. An attempt to sweeten the poison would have been worth the wait.

He watched her face as she scrutinized the contents. Her hair was neatly tied in a blue chiffon scarf, the same colour as her eye shadow. A wisp of brown hair had escaped from the scarf and tumbled down a cheek. She started to shake as she discarded the

letter beside her. But if he tried to comfort her, she was bound to push him away. Suddenly he realised how cold the house was. There was no fire in the grate, a wind was whining down the vacant chimney; it blew the letter back onto the floor again where it lay, the spidery handwriting uppermost, the imparted news laid bare. Moorcroft's face returned to George, stubbornly remaining in his vision.

"And do you have any choice in the matter?" Her voice was toneless, measured.

"I could always turn it down. Try my luck back in Manchester."

"Start from the bottom again? Impossible. I won't let you." Her clenched fist landed on the arm of the sofa.

Relief passed through him. What would he have done if she had agreed to that? Manchester. Rain, grey, descending in icy torrents; colourless offices in gaunt, humourless buildings. No, he could not have returned to Manchester.

"Moorcroft is punishing us, George. Susan and me, for your actions. For your thoughtlessness, your selfishness... what you did. Does he realise that? It's us he's punishing. Not you."

Everything she said was true. His actions had disgusted, appalled everyone that now knew. Moorcroft had said as much a few hours earlier. He picked up the letter from the floor, folded it, replaced it in his pocket. He noticed how cold Dorothy looked; saw the tips of her fingers were pink. He asked her if he should light a fire. She stared at him.

"What about Susan?" she asked again. "Her school, her friends? What plans do you have for her? Where will we live? What about all this, our furniture? My new settee?"

Hands steady now, she poured herself another sherry. George waited expectantly, fiddling with the empty glass on his knee. No top-up was offered. A bauble on the Christmas tree caught the light as it turned. Fleeting, his eyes strayed to it.

"What will I tell my parents? Can you imagine Grace's reaction?" She tugged at a strand of hair.

So many questions. What else did he expect? But if there was a way of being transported back two years, of reliving the meeting with Emma, he would not be able

to resist breaking the same rules. Only given a second chance, he would take more precautions, adhering to the principles of care, of secrecy. How many times had he relived the moment of discovery, reinvented the passing of events? And still he did not know how much Dorothy had told her family, her friends, the neighbours. It would not be like her to admit to her shame; for that is how she saw it, he knew that. Lifting the electric fire to one side, he poked at the ashes in the fire place.

“When is Susan due back?” Uncertain whether to build a fire, he traced a circle in the fallen ashes. Though he longed to feel some warmth seep into him, bring some cheer into their home, he replaced the poker against the surround.

“I’ll tell her.” Dorothy stood, moved away. “I’ll do all the explaining. She’s staying at a friend’s for tea after Guides. Not a word from you when she comes back. Not until I’ve spoken to her.” She was staring at a photo of Susan, taken the year before on Brighton Pier. George looked too, remembered the day he took it, the wind catching Susan’s dress, blowing it out like an inflated beach ball.

She turned, so her back was to him and he wondered whether she was about to cry. Would she respond to a show of gentleness, the care he still felt for her?

“All day I’ve been thinking about this meeting. I even caught myself praying this afternoon.” There were no tears in her voice; instead she gave a forced laugh. “I thought they’d give you a second chance, simply not promote you for a couple of years. Perhaps even a transfer to another office. But this? I never imagined this. I don’t want to go to Malaya. I like it here. Why can’t he give you another job here?” Her voice was rising. “Can you ask him for an alternative?”

Best that she did not know how close he had got to joining the queues at the Labour Exchange, for that is how it might have been. He stared down at the rug and told her no, there was no point in that.

“Moorcroft knew my father,” he said. “Said he was being lenient because of it.”

She said nothing to this, but stared blankly at the Christmas tree. “I’ll get supper.” A waft of her perfume caught him unawares as she reached towards the table for her glass. He looked up at her; their eyes met for a second, before she straightened and left the room, her petticoat rustling beneath her woollen dress.

The fireplace looked forlorn, abandoned, ash with dust forming a thin skin on the hearth. He shifted his eyes to *The Times* lying on the footstool, the crossword still empty, beckoning. Folding the newspaper carefully into four, he tucked it into his pocket and went through to the dining room.

The hatch was closed and for a minute he hesitated, listening to Dorothy bustling in the kitchen, filling a saucepan with water, lighting the gas. He opened the hatch, peered through into the kitchen, watched her stir gravy on the stove, one hand resting on her hip. "We'll have servants to do all that. An amah, a cook. You won't have to lift a finger." Surely, Dorothy would like that, at least.

There was no reply. He sat down at the table. The smell of steak and kidney pie grew more intense with her footsteps as they neared the dining room. Ignoring his eyes which followed her every move, she settled the pie on the table, retrieved the plates from the hatch. "And boarding school's not so bad. It can be quite enjoyable." Perhaps the regime was not so cruel for girls. Involuntarily, his left eye started to twitch.

"You told me it was awful, that you'll never forget it. I remember you saying how the experience had affected you. Forever, you'd said." She was staring at the pie. Steam curled gracefully towards the ceiling. "Do you think she'll manage any better than you?"

He recalled the terror of watching his own parents disappearing into a cloud of steam, the friendly chug altered to a mean hiss, as the train moved away, taking them to India. But that was before the war, such a long time ago.

"It's different now. Susan will be fine. She'll like staying with Grace and Tom in the holidays," George said.

"Grace will think her prayers have been answered. At last an opportunity to have a child." Dorothy's tone was bitter, full of sarcasm. "A prime opportunity for her to mould her niece in her ways." A deep sigh followed. "Couldn't she come with us?"

He did not answer. He was remembering standing in the corridor outside the dorm: mid-winter, no shirt, bare feet. He jolted as she repeated her question.

"We'll have to see." Now was not the time to tell her of the drink with Jenkins, the information he had gleaned about Malaya, the reason he was late.

The potatoes and peas on his plate were growing cold. He picked at the pastry for a while, then gave up. Rubbing his eye he looked across the table; Dorothy was staring at her untouched food, her hand turning the fork over and over. Desperately, he wanted to confide in her, tell her what he knew about Malaya. It would be cruel not to give her some inkling, at least impart a proportion of what he had learnt. But he had to allow her time, give her that at least. The initial outburst was only natural, but he knew that tomorrow she would want to know more details. The newspapers carried so little news of British outposts, preferring only to relay the good, the ceremonial events; or, when they chose to report on disturbances in the Empire, embellishing the stories with tales of British heroes. And why would she bother scouring the papers for news of a country in the South China Seas? Of the Emergency in Malaya, even he had known very little, before his chat with Jenkins. A disagreement between the natives, he remembered reading in *The Times* that was dealt with effectively by the British Army. Too many wars, Jenkins had said. The public are sick of them, scared of the Communists, terrified of an invasion. Best to keep them unaware of the reality of the Emergency.

Dorothy collected the dinner plates. He touched her lightly on her arm, a token of their old bond. Her eyes closed briefly, before she returned to the kitchen. But she had not pushed his hand away, or lashed out at him, as she had a couple of weeks before.

A gust of wind rattled the window; he got up and drew the curtain back, listened to cats howling, scrapping in the dark. His face stared back at him, from a blackness he could not penetrate. Adjusting his focus, he caught sight of the frozen lawn. The snow had stopped, the branches of the apple tree were motionless. Shadows, elongated, wandering in the wind, gave an unfamiliar, peculiar look to the garden. And the door to his shed creaked and moaned; the place where he used to sit on sunny Sunday afternoons, thinking of Emma, dreaming of touching her silky skin.

Dorothy returned with the coffee. No pudding tonight; he was tired of the after-taste of tinned peaches anyway, cloying, like paper glue.

"I hear there's a magnificent array of tropical fruits in Malaya. You might like them." He leaned across the table towards her. "You can learn to play bridge." There was a time, he remembered, when Dorothy's mouth would turn up, and dimples would form when he brought the cards out to play his tricks for Susan. A sigh dispelled the vision. "It could have been worse," he said. Immediately, he regretted his futile remark.

Picking her knife up, she played with it, running her finger along the cutting edge. "Have you forgotten why you've been sent there?" She dropped two sugar lumps into her coffee, her features rigid.

In a curious way, her question was equivocal. The reason for his exile would never be far from his thoughts. He could not forget Emma, despite all his attempts to rid her from his conscience. Lately, he would attempt to remove the image of her face, he would try and replace her memory with a picture of Dorothy, her angular features, with brown eyes, deep and questioning.

The front door burst open and Susan's voice filled the emptiness between them.

"Not a word to her," Dorothy said, her voice low. "Understand?" She stood, gripped his wrist. Her face was devoid of colour. "Let me deal with this."

Turning to face the opening door, George watched his daughter as she entered the dining room, saw her smile slowly dim, as she looked first at Dorothy then at him.

Chapter 2

Dorothy stared at the gas jets burning in the open oven; at the blues and yellows merging, turning into a shimmering haze. Malaya: pink on the map like so much else; apart from that, she barely knew where it was. For a brief moment she felt sorry for George as she imagined him in Moorcroft's wood-panelled office, shuffling his feet, his head hung in shame. But why Malaya? Why so far away? Weeks after the telling, her mind still turned like the flypaper that hung in her parents' grocer's shop. Why had George not tried harder? Why not somewhere nearer? And would George have asked the same question of his boss? But he had sounded as if Moorcroft were doing them a favour; the mention of George's father, the old school loyalty.

A pile of newspapers, rescued from under the stairs, lay discarded on the table. Picking up the top one, she searched through the foreign news again, for the third time that morning. She glanced over an article about Yugoslavia and the UN vote, turned the page over. But there was nothing about Malaya. Before, she had always glossed over news posted from Reuters about countries so far away; now they all seemed to evade her.

Exhaled smoke filled the kitchen; a fog clinging to the ceiling. How many cigarettes

had she smoked, sitting there since before dawn? She went to open the window a fraction. The snow was still thick on the ground, with footprints of birds running across the lawn. A robin briefly settled on the honeysuckle then flew off to better pickings. The postman was whistling Jingle Bells as he made his way up their path.

She heard Susan call out as she clattered down the stairs. Turning her wedding ring round on her finger, Dorothy wondered how Susan would react to the news. Quickly, she raked her fingers through her hair, threw the contents of the ashtray into the bin.

Susan stopped in the doorway and stared at the cooker. "Why have you got all the burners on?"

"I'm going out in a minute. I was just cold. It's so cold, don't you think, darling?"

"Are you all right? Is everything..." Her eyes came to rest on the newspapers.

"Everything's fine. You'll miss your bus." A quick kiss. "Got your homework?" Susan nodded and studied the cold toast, butter congealing on the surface. Her eyes rested on the empty cigarette packet, nothing escaping her observation. Muttering goodbye, she left for school, dragging her satchel behind her.

The delay of telling Susan could not last another day. Dorothy decided she would sit her down that night, but first there would have to be some careful thinking, some planning, a way of getting it all in order. And Susan did not need to know everything. It would be better for her that details were scanty.

The windows had steamed up and the kitchen had an unhealthy warmth to it: a sweatiness, permeated by the fumes of coal gas. This is how Malaya would be; steamy jungles, unbelievable heat. What would their house be like over there? She remembered seeing pictures of houses on stilts with the staircase on the outside, the front door at the top of the stairs. Would she, too, live in an upside-down house with its innards showing for all to see? How would she sleep with mosquitoes whining round her, insects scratching at the walls? And would she have to tolerate one prolonged season? No winter in Malaya, no need to wear her fox fur and matching hat. No more snowmen, ducking snowballs, or sitting in front of a blazing fire, supping brandy egg flips. She tipped the toast into the bin, washed her cup and saucer. Servants to do all that, George had said, as if this would make all the difference.

"I'm going to the hairdresser's," she called up the stairs.

There was no answer. Again, she called out, her tone louder, more insistent. George appeared at the top of the stairs, naked from the waist up, a towel draped over his torso like a robe. His muscles appeared more developed, his shoulders broader, better toned than the last time she had looked at him properly and she wondered why she had not noticed before. As he came down the stairs towards her, she found herself gazing at his chest, at the curve of muscle, the hollow above his collar bone; the place she used to brush with her lips. Had Emma done the same? Turning her back to him, she put her hand to her eyes; she would not cry anymore. Her profile in the hall mirror looked no different from the usual one, as if the grief and anger of the past two weeks had forgotten to leave a mark, to change the shape of her features. She applied some more lipstick, dabbed her nose with powder and tied a scarf round her head.

"I'll be back a little late tonight. Things to tie up, then I'm meeting up with Jenkins. And that's the truth." He stayed on a step halfway down the stairs and put his hands out, imploring. "You must believe me. I'll get some introductions for Malaya," he said. "Make life easier for both of us out there if we have introductions." He reached the bottom step and the towel slipped off his shoulders. "Did you manage to sleep last night?" he asked, his voice concerned, innocent.

"No," she said and wondered how long it was possible to exist without sleep. Already, she felt the onset of unreality, an edginess that made her fidget and jump at sudden sounds.

He went to touch her face, then withdrew his hand suddenly. "If Susan's already in bed when I get back, say goodnight to her. Have you told her yet?"

Dorothy knew he was staring at her, felt his eyes fastened to her profile. "No," she said again.

"Maybe tomorrow. The two of us. Not fair to keep it from her for so long." He picked up the letter from the hall table. "This is from the new school, isn't it?"

She nodded, took it from him, dropped it into her bag. She would read it first, she told him, then she would decide.

"Decide what?"

But she chose not to answer and he did not press her. As she left the house, a pile of snow slid down gracefully from the roof with the closing of the front door. The air was thick with a greyish smog and the wind felt Siberian. She turned her coat collar up and headed towards the local shops. Tears, brought on by the cutting wind, fell down her face as she walked, head down, past the bread shop, crammed full of shoppers, yeasty aromas, spreading out into the street. She opened the door to the shop next door, her hairdresser's. The sudden warmth, a nebulous perfumed mist of shampoo, of setting lotion and fragrant bodies was reassuring for Dorothy; a feminine space, a delightful haven. It was like visiting an old friend.

Adelina sat her down in front of the mirror. Dorothy patted her hair and put her head on one side. "I think I'd like something different today." She turned round and looked at Adelina "I want a complete change. A perm maybe?"

"A curl will suit you." Adelina lifted the hair up from her nape. "Something like this?"

Their eyes met in the reflection. "For Christmas? A present for your husband, yes?"

Dorothy smiled, moved her focus to her own face, noticed a darkness under her eyes.

"Yes, a perm is very fashionable," Adelina continued. "Would you like to put this on?" She held out a cape, the same pink as the marzipan wrapped round a Battenberg cake. Slipping it on, Dorothy continued to stare at herself, at her cheeks changing to a rosy colour, warmed by the artificial heat. Watching Adelina as she sorted through her hairdressing implements, picking out a fine-toothed comb for Dorothy, she wondered if she knew much about Malaya, had picked up information from a client, perhaps heard a reference to the colony on the television she was so proud to own.

A blast of cold air from the opening door made Dorothy wrap her arms round herself. Another customer walked in. Adelina greeted the newcomer and escorted her to the back of the salon. Dorothy half-listened to their chatter about the weather and preparations for Christmas. The rhythmic hum of hairdryers bobbed in the background as she closed her eyes. Did she have to go to Malaya? Were there choices for her? There was always the possibility of divorcing George. Harriet, her school friend, had managed without her husband, had two children to take care of, though of course, her open-minded parents helped out. But could Dorothy do the same? There would be her sister to deal with: she imagined Grace's reaction if she were to divorce

George. There would be references to the holy sanctity of marriage and implicit pointers to the physical comforts George had brought.

Adelina returned with a catalogue of photos of women in soft focus; their hair curled, faces glowing. Turning the pages, Dorothy stopped at a picture of a woman with pouting lips and pencilled eyebrows, happy, relaxed, carefree. Hair swept off her face, framing her delicate features.

“I want to look like that.”

“That’d suit you really well,” Adelina said. Fingers flew through Dorothy’s hair. Shaking her wrists like a magician about to perform a conjuring trick, Adelina flicked the hair, fluffed it out, drew it back from her temples, then led Dorothy over to a basin. A stream of warm water cascaded onto her head. The tears started, this time real tears. Impossible to stop them, unaided. She grabbed a towel, pressed it to her eyes, tried to concentrate on the sensation of gentle hands massaging soap into her hair, lifting the strands with well-practised manoeuvres.

If she divorced George, what would she do for income? Perhaps he might agree to only provide for the bare essentials. She could stay in the house in Golders Green, keep Susan at the local school, ask her parents to help her out, work in their grocer’s shop. But she would not be allowed to forget all she had thrown away. Her father thought George a nice young man, still referred to him as such, even after their fourteen years of marriage. Her mother said he looked after her, gave the best to Susan. “At least you won’t have to slice ham every day of your married life,” she said on Dorothy’s visits, as they sat amongst the familiar odours: cheese, biscuits, pork pie.

No, Dorothy could not bear the idea of going begging to her family, dealing with their disappointment, the cover up. For they were bound to tell their friends she was a widow; that is how they would cope, by eliciting sympathy and understanding. And if she were to try it alone, to leave George to deal with the tropical outpost without her, would she be strong enough to put up with the distasteful looks, the shuns by other women that Harriet had endured? More to the point would Susan be able to defend herself? How would she handle being the only child in her class with a divorced mother, the wrongdoer? For that’s how it would seem to them. Breaking up the family home; Dorothy would be blamed for that.

Adelina was dribbling cold fluid over the curlers. It smelt like drain cleaner, made Dorothy shiver unexpectedly, but still she carried on smiling at their two reflections. A net was pulled over her head, cotton wool secured, covering her ears.

“Are you looking forward to Christmas?” Adelina asked as she shepherded Dorothy to a row of dryers.

“Indeed I am.” The gracious lie, well-practised of late. A magazine was placed on her knee. Her eyes fell on an advert for gravy powder, the happy family set round the table, all present and correct.

The alternative to divorce, thought Dorothy, was to grit her teeth and depart for Malaya. She pretended to doze under the hooded hairdryer.

It was eleven by the time she left the hairdresser's. A man was sweeping the streets, making piles of snow blackened by the sooty fog, filthy puddles forming where it was turning to slush. The sky was murky, ashen, the pebble-dashed houses colourless, their grey windows like closed eyes. No one she knew passed her by. More than anything she wanted to be invited in for a cup of tea, another ear, an alternative view point, but no opportunity arose. She leaned into the wind, and struggled home, keeping a tight hold of the scarf round her hair.

At home, she examined herself in the hall mirror. The curls were pretty, framing her face, accentuating the roundness of her eyes. But still she was disappointed; she looked nothing like the model in the magazine.

It was time to write to Grace. Sitting at the dining room table she doodled on the blotter, drawing spirals that expanded across the page. She wrote about the bitterness of the wind, the snowball fights in their neighbours' gardens, the Christmas tree glittering in their bay window, the pudding in the larder and how much she was looking forward to seeing both of them and having a family Christmas once again. She fiddled with her ring and sat staring out at the garden, at the bare trees, their branches bent towards the ground, the snow weighing them down. I bet he's in St John's Wood now *she thought*, not at work, not making final arrangements, or meeting Jenkins. All nicely clean shaven and smelling of Old Spice, his hair styled like Dennis Compton's.

She sighed, rested her head in her hands. The pen dropped to the floor. Pushing her

chair back quickly, she stood, made her way into the sitting room and poured herself a glass of sherry. As she took the first sip, then the second, a warm glow spread from the pit of her stomach, a reassurance that her inclination, her decision on the matter was right. The middle road was a sensible option.

Back at the table her pen hovered over her letter. I have some news to impart to you she wrote. George has been very fortunate at work. You know how much he is appreciated there. She chewed at the end of the pen. Words about apt punishment, the evil of telling lies, came back to her, drilled in by her mother. The sherry glass stood empty by her side. She fetched the decanter, refilled her glass. He has been offered a promotion to Malaya. The opportunity is such that he has decided to take it. We will be sailing out there on 10th January, and we would like you to be Susan's guardians while she remains at school here. She paused and drew a jagged Christmas tree on the blotter with a large-winged fairy to top it. She thought of George with Emma, all the trouble, the anguish he had caused. Now both she and Susan were paying for his selfishness, his narcissism, his sheer stupidity.

An hour later, Dorothy was in the sitting room, perched on the edge of the sofa, her feet warming in front of the newly-lit fire. A tray was laid on a footstool, one cup and saucer, a glass, two plates, butter, raspberry jam and a dish of crumpets, steaming, fresh from the oven. The front gate clicked open and she heard Susan's footsteps running along the path.

Susan said nothing at first when Dorothy told her. Stunned, she slumped in her seat, as if all her energy had been forcibly removed, and Dorothy was not surprised when she started to wheeze. The ghastly medicine, the vile spray, had been prepared, brought downstairs ready, just in case. With her arm round Susan; she helped her recover, stroking, patting her back as the sound in her chest quietened.

"Not much time, is there?" Susan said eventually when her breathing eased. "Jane's parents were given six months before they went to Rhodesia." She refused the freshly buttered crumpet. "Why can't I go with you? I don't want to go to boarding school. Why can't Daddy turn it down? You've never said anything about him wanting to go abroad. Why now? At Christmas?" She stopped for a minute, drew a breath, her freckles pale, the colour of oatmeal. "Do you think there's a chance he might turn it down?" Fixing her gaze on her untouched milk, she said, "I knew there was something

wrong, something going on. I wish you'd told me before." She took in another breath. A wheeze was still squeezing her lungs.

Dorothy reached out for Susan's hand, and began rubbing it, caressing the fingers. "There's absolutely nothing wrong. You mustn't think that. It's for the best. You'll see in time." The words sounded so convincing to Dorothy, she almost believed them herself. "And your school is so near to Auntie Grace and Uncle Tom, you'll be able to visit them at weekends. Then you can visit us. Come out to Malaya. It'll be fun, you'll see."

Susan's eyes fell to the ashtray, to the letter from the school secured underneath, its school crest visible. "Can I read it?" she asked.

"Yes, of course." A shard of coal spat from the fire as Dorothy waited for Susan to finish reading. Her hand shook as she lifted a cup of tea to her lips.

"I'm going to Carol's house for tea," Susan said suddenly.

"What do you think of it? Your new school?" Dorothy nodded towards the letter. "Looks jolly nice to me."

"I'll be back in an hour," Susan said.

Shaking off Dorothy's restraining hand, she stood and screwed the letter into a ball, threw it onto the floor. "It's not fair." Tears were bubbling in her eyes. "I don't want you to go."

She rushed out of the room, slammed the door. The following silence was interminable. The only break in the quiet was the slow drip-drip of water as snow melted in the gutters, and the carefully constructed snowman shifted, its axis collapsing as the thermometer slipped above freezing. A throb started over Dorothy's eye. No stopping now, she thought. The lie has been told. She rested her head in her hands, leant over towards the fireside, waiting for Susan, then George, to return home.

Chapter 3

George picked up the paper chain from where it had fallen to the floor and draped it back round the mirror over the fireplace. A quick check at all the other decorations

reassured him that everything was in order. To prevent any irritation on Dorothy's behalf, every little action helped, exasperated though he was with the compliance she sought to aid her with her plans. Of her need to obtain approval he understood, but it was the deluge of story lines that he found irksome. And he really had no choice but to agree, to keep up the layers of tales, though they were becoming troublesome, impossible to recall with the exactitude needed to maintain the façade. It was not so much that he blamed her; he could understand how she felt, her anger, her disappointment. But he would have preferred the true reason for their exodus to Malaya to be out; he had prepared himself for the rebuffs, the disbelief and horror at his actions. And now there was no going back. The Christmas visitors had arrived two days early with their congratulations and good cheer. On that day of all days when he had to get away, could not, would not change his appointment, the only chance he would have before leaving for Malaya.

Tom was rocking on his heels, warming his bottom in front of the fire.

"I couldn't be more surprised," he said. "Never thought you were the type to want to go abroad." A smile of understanding passed across his face. "Was it for Dorothy? Is she behind the promotion? Looking for a better life? The grass is always greener?" He chuckled. "They're very alike, aren't they, in some ways, Dorothy and her sister. Though Grace of course is always seeking to better herself through Him up above." And he raised his eyes to the ceiling. "But we are delighted to be Susan's guardians while you are away. A gap in our lives it has been. Not to have been blessed as you have." Putting his hand to his mouth, he coughed and George saw two red circles forming a deep flush on his cheeks.

But the reference to the desertion of Susan made his stomach rage in turmoil of terrible guilt. If there is a God he thought, it is His duty to watch over Susan, and not to allow her to pay for her father's indiscretion. But he knew no God existed, had seen the burning cities of Germany from three thousand feet above, his finger on the button to annihilate it all. Every Christmas he thought of this, as though the date was set as a reminder. Turning towards him, he noticed Tom looking at him curiously, as if he was trying to read his mind.

"We are very grateful to you," George said as he glanced at the wall clock. He would have to leave soon, he wanted to be early for his appointment; a suitable excuse for

Dorothy had not yet formed in his mind. Then there was Susan with her quiet fury, he would have to make amends for the absence he would soon generate. Tom was going on about Susan, telling Dorothy that there was no need to worry, that she would soon get used to being apart from them. And George was concerned too, but for now he had more pressing demands on his mind. Would he have time to change into more suitable attire? Calculating fast, he dispelled this idea, he would have to leave as he was.

Grace was singing Noel, the descant part, as she carried a tray of steaming mince pies into the sitting room. Strange that she and Dorothy were sisters, so unlike, despite Tom's belief that they shared the same ethos, had so much in common. He watched Grace as she dished out the mince pies into the best china, her pale blue twin set buttoned to the neck, a pearl necklace laid over the wool, her hair grey at such an early age. But her complexion was as fresh as Dorothy's, the same bloom on her cheeks. On hearing Dorothy call up the stairs to Susan, he began to fidget with his tie, sliding his fingers under his collar; he still could not think what to say to explain his departure from the family gathering.

Then Dorothy entered the room, her *Blue Grass* perfume following close behind. She had made a special effort, had swept her hair back to show off her neck, was wearing a blue dress with a matching stole, not an outfit he had seen before. Her smile was demure, another reminder of how easily she had fallen into the role of a willing partner to their removal. She nodded in the direction of the sherry. There was no alternative but to tell her now. Easier to tackle with his back to her, he made his way to the decanter, held it up to the light, then poured some into a glass, hesitated before turning to hand it to Grace.

"I'm afraid I have to go out in a bit. Well now, actually. I'm terribly sorry. Bad timing. Business, of course. Nothing I can do. Very sorry as I say. But I won't be long." Handing Dorothy her glass of sherry, he caught the hurt in her eyes. She knew he was lying, but what could she say if she was to keep up the front?

"What a shame," said Tom. "But I expect you have a lot to sort out. We understand, don't we dear?" Briefly, he touched his wife's arm.

"Can't you wait until Susan comes down?" asked Dorothy, her voice high, strained.

"Sorry, no. I had better be off. The sooner I go..." He kissed Dorothy on her cheek. Innocent, pretending not to know about the remonstrations, the questioning and tears he would suffer tonight while the rest of the household slumbered.

It was sunny at first when he left the house, this day of his last meeting with Emma; a low winter sun dazzled unexpectedly. The ground remained sodden, soaked from the melted snow, and the torrential rain of the night before. Later, as the tube crawled along, he stared up at the silhouettes of chimneys and roof tops against the clear sky, and noticed a cloud, black enough to hold a downpour, spreading slowly across, until eventually the sun was obliterated.

Then the rain came. Puddles formed on the straggly grass which passed as lawns in the back gardens, water flowed from leaking gutters, and spread from drains blocked with leaves. The tube shuddered to a stop; a sodden solitary sheet hung, forgotten on a line in a yard directly in his vision. Until it was replaced by the blur of a tube train travelling at top speed going in the opposite direction, before his tube picked up momentum and shot underground.

At Euston, he got out and pushed his way through the crowds. He queued at the bottom of the escalator, his nose nearly touching the gabardine mackintosh of the man in front of him. Outside, people were bad-tempered in the rain; they hurried without looking where they were going, holding umbrellas as if they were weapons with which they might strike. He decided to walk the mile to the Café Royal, he was in fact half an hour early, he had left extra time in case of an emergency: the tube breaking down, a body on the line, as happened sometimes, on grey days similar to this.

When he reached the place where he knew the Café Royal stood, he at first thought he had come to the wrong building. He had not expected the scaffolding. In his mind's eye, he had pictured the grand pillared steps up to the double door, painted red with the ushers waiting to take his coat, show him to his table. But, of course, his memory of the coffee house belonged to two years earlier, his first secret meeting with Emma. He had not considered it might have changed, had forgotten about the headlines in September of the fire which nearly gutted the building and destroyed the art deco facades. Would Emma pass the building by as he had nearly done? He toyed with the idea of waiting outside in the rain for her. But then she would see him bedraggled,

desperate, his face tinged with blue from the cold.

He was shown to a table in the bow window. The cafe was nearly empty, as he had expected at this time in the morning. The coffee machines hissed and spluttered like a consumptive, but the smell was glorious, thick and heady.

“Would you like to order?” A waitress offered him a menu. “We’ve got a large assortment of cakes too,” she said and indicated to a trolley where cakes sat, uncut, untouched. He could see walnuts, cherries on sponges and crystallized oranges on white icing. Or mince pies piled on a red and gold plate.

“I’ll wait thanks, I’m expecting a friend,” he said. Maybe she could not get away. Had this been a foolish idea of his? He stared out of the window for a minute, to avoid the waitress’ gaze. It was still raining, a thick fog had descended, headlights swirled in the gloom.

At that moment Emma came through the door. She saw him immediately, smiled at him as the waitress took her coat and led the way to his table. She was breathing hard, and her face was flushed. She quickly looked over her shoulder before she sat down next to George.

“I can’t stay long,” she said and leant over towards him, her scent fragrant, light.

He saw she was wearing an ivory blouse. It emphasised the green of her eyes, her pale skin. The fineness of the fabric made him want to undo the top two buttons, to feel the warmth of her breast.

Reaching for her hand across the table, he thought how supple it was. “We’ll make the most of it, what little time we have.” Disappointment made him swallow hard. Somehow he had imagined them spending most of the day together.

The waitress arrived, trolley in tow with her chat about Christmas festivities, her questions about their plans, what parties they would be attending. Eventually, after too long, she backed away, perhaps, at last, conscious of their desire to be left alone.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving so soon. It’s all happened so quickly.” She shook her head slowly, closed her eyes for a second.

He caressed her hand, lifted it to his lips. “I’ll come back,” he said. “I’ll come back.”

"Sometimes I hate my father."

"No, no don't hate him."

She turned and looked out of the window, and he noticed her brooch catching the light. "I never dreamt he'd do such a thing."

"But will you wait for me? Or will you marry your Lieutenant, the man your father approves of? You might forget me. That's what your father would like."

"No, no. Don't speak like this. How could I forget you?"

"I'll write. Every day if I can..." George said.

"The letters will take such a long time from Malaya. But when I get them, I'll read them over and over, then I'll tie them all in a silk ribbon. I'll write long passionate letters by return of post." Her voice was a near whisper.

"If only you were coming with me." He sighed; a deep sigh. "Ludicrous, even to think of such an event. Sometimes, though, it does no harm to dream."

She removed her hand from under his and took a sip of her coffee. "He couldn't have sent you much further away. To such a dangerous place too."

"I hear the Emergency is just about all over now. No need to worry about me on that account. I'll be fine. Though it will be intolerable without you. Without our meetings to look forward to. Sometimes I wonder how this can happen. How can we part now? I never believed in fate before. Didn't believe in anything. But it is as though..." He did not know how to put his feelings into words and it was clear that she was close to tears. Leaning forward he touched her cheek, and she held his hand there until she was able to maintain a posture of calmness, her hair smoothed back into place. They resumed talking, tears always a possibility, kept at bay in a public place.

"I have to go now," she finally said. "I'm already late."

They were the words he had been dreading. Reaching for his hand she returned it to her face and closed her eyes.

George's return journey, the damp clothes smelling of city smog, the mounting of

stairs, the clamour of the underground passed over him, as if he were a spectator, a visitor to a strange world. Soon he was at his front door, his key in his hand, the strains of Come all Ye Faithful sifting through the cold night air...

"That's over with," he said as he entered the room. Straight for the sherry, he downed a glass in a single gulp.

Looking round he saw Grace and Dorothy squashed together on the couch, a conspiratorial look on their faces. And he wondered whether Dorothy had decided to reveal all, that the calmness with which Tom was playing Scrabble with Susan was a silent front for the row which would follow. If that were the case, he really did not care at the moment. Anything would be sufferable, bearable compared to that final goodbye to Emma.

Susan turned her body towards him, knocking over her Scrabble set. Her eyes looked rounder than usual as she stared at him. "Where've you been Daddy?"

Dorothy stood, adjusted a bauble on the tree.

"Business. Boring business. At work. What have you been doing?"

The record scratched to a stop, but the needle spun on. Susan sucked her cheeks in. "Nothing," she said.

"Another carol I think, don't you?" Grace's voice.

"You've never been to work at Christmas time before."

"Susan," Dorothy said. "You shouldn't talk to your father like that."

"Sorry." She got up and stood by the door. She stared at the Christmas tree for a minute then returned to Tom and the game of Scrabble.

AGES 16 TO 21

FEATHERBONES – URBAN FICTION AND NEW ADULT

Felix walks the same way to work through Southampton every morning, and the same way home again in the evenings. His life up to this point feels like one day repeated over and over; a speck of silt caught in the city's muddied waters. Sometimes it is all he can do to sit and watch while the urban sprawl races indifferently around him. But when the city stares back at him, one evening after work, everything changes.

He doesn't see the statue's head move, but he feels its eyes on him, studying him from its lofty perch in East Park. From then on he continues to glimpse it, or something like it, encroaching with every visitation. With it come memories, spilling through the streets, crawling through the dark, haunting his night-time flat, until he isn't quite sure what is real any more and what is imagined, in this hard, grey place where the gulls watch him sleep...

Reviews

"...a unique story and I appreciated that, along with the beautiful writing. Very thought provoking novel."

Ana Carter, Reviewer, Canada

"Featherbones ... is beautifully written, with almost lyrical prose. It's the kind of book that sets the mood early and it can be a bit overwhelming in its greyness. Stay with it and you will be rewarded by a well plotted story that twists and wanders so many places. If you like Magical Realism with a touch of Psychological Suspense, this book will delight you. I think it would make an interesting book discussion selection."

Janet Kinsella, Tacoma Public Library, USA

"Featherbones is an ethereal love song to a city by the sea. Thomas Brown's beautiful novel depicts a liminal world of statues, drownings and winged creatures. It's also a real page turner. I love this book."

Rebecca Smith, author of The Bluebird Café

"This is an exquisitely written novel; deft, poised, and with a writer's ear for the

rhythms of the world around us. *Featherbones* does the always-difficult job of making the strange familiar, while asking us to attend again to the things we think we know.”

William May, author and lecturer

“I loved the use of language, I loved the story and above all I loved the constant sensation that I was walking on the top of the dividing wall between reality and dream and imagination and past and present and future. I want to live on that wall for the rest of my life.”

Bookcrazy blog

“What to call this experience? Magical realism doesn’t quite fit right. Magical-psychological-philosophical-realism. Maybe. This is a book that will be unlike any other that you have read.

“There are some very well crafted passages in this book, and some amazing uses of language. It is really the beautiful language, in my opinion, that makes this a book worth the time to read and share with others. I liked the characters ... the way the story developed and the way the reader is never quite sure if what is happening is actual reality or just the imaginings of a confused mind.

“If you enjoy reading books that make you think, and make you wonder at the author’s ability to turn every day ordinary into something else, something a bit more extraordinary, then I recommend this book to you.”

Ionia Martin, Readful things blog

“In Southampton, England, a grey, rain-filled place, the story of Felix, and Michael’s set. Repeating patterns, like grey days, the same walk through the city every morning and evening, and the sight of birds, characterize the book. What if birds were human, or humans became birds? Remember the classic on Icarus and his father Daedalus, the creator of the labyrinth?

“It’s exactly this fate and circumstance that Thomas Brown as author throws his readers in while reading *Featherbones*. There seems no way out of this storyline. Dream and reality converge. It’s difficult to stay concentrated. Is the reference to the Titanic a clue? Will one of the main characters commit suicide, or turn into a bird at

full moon?

“...I’m impressed by the psychologically laden plot and the way a small world becomes even smaller throughout *Featherbones*.”

Henk-Jan van der Klis, Reviewer, Netherlands

“*Featherbones* is the second of Thomas Brown’s novels that I have read and I think that I enjoyed this more than “*Lynnwood*”, which I loved. Having made this statement, however, the book is going to be hard to review without telling readers too much about the plot.

“Felix, the main character, is a young graduate, living his rather mundane life in Southampton. The highlight of his week is his Friday night drinking binge with his workmate and long-time friend, Michael. All seems fairly commonplace, until an event acts as a trigger for Felix to fall, swoop, descend into unreality.

“The novel looks back to Felix’s traumatic childhood - so many events that could lead to an uncertain future for Felix’s mental health. Looking into the past, we meet Felix’s father, his teacher, his very best friend, Harriet and a man who was supposed to be helping Felix overcome his disturbed childhood.

“What I love about this novel is that it works on several levels and is open to different interpretations. For me, it is about guilt, repression, sexuality and the need for each of us to know ourselves. It is about acceptance, love and trust.

“Thomas Brown writes such beautiful prose; *Featherbones* is worth reading for this alone. However there is much more to appreciate - a fine, thought-provoking novel.”

Angela Thomas, Reviewer, UK

Preview of Featherbones, by Thomas Brown ISBN 9781907230516 (print), 9781907230523 (epub)

Chapter One

The deep mewing of a gull draws Felix from his dreams. This close to the sea, there are

many gulls. It is their city, as much as anyone else's. Pinching the sleep from the corners of his eyes, he gazes across to the window sill. The bird stands with its back to him, wings tucked to its chest, as though surveying the streets spread out nine floors beneath it. In the morning light, its feathers appear grey, and quite dirty. He makes to move from under the covers and it turns sharply, studying him with one beady eye.

For several seconds man and bird stare each other out. Then he staggers from bed and it screams at him through the glass before plummeting from the windowsill. When he realises it is Monday, he considers doing the same.

Every morning Felix walks the same way down the high street to the offices on London Road, and every evening he walks the same way home again. The sounds of the city wash over him; the murmur of car engines, gull cries, laughter as students trail past him on their way to Halls of Residence, and beneath it all the maritime roar of the sea.

His flat overlooks the docks and it takes him thirty minutes, at most, to get from one end of the city to the other. The walk is generally uneventful. He barely notices the streets any more, the pavements, the faces of passers-by. When Michael and he first took the vacancies with the recruitment agency it was a temporary set-up. He had just finished his History degree and needed money to support himself. He has worked at the agency for over five years now; five years of his life lost to the city by the sea.

The office stirs with morning activity. Years ago, the team numbered eight. Now they are four, including Mr. Coleson. He cannot see Mr. Coleson in his office but he can hear him and his deep-bellied laughter through the door, propped open enough to remind everyone that he is there and they are here to work another week. The rest of the office is a small, communal space. The stationery drawer sits empty, functioning biros as rare as new job prospects. A cleaning rota stares back at them from the cork noticeboard on the wall, detailing precisely whose turn it is to vacuum the carpet, dust the windows, mop the lavatories, and when. No one was especially enthused when this rota was drawn up, but none less so than Maggie, who, on her thirtieth birthday, took Mr. Coleson aside and threatened to leave in a voice not unlike those belonging to the gulls outside, unless he removed her from the rota immediately. It is difficult to call what occurred that morning a conversation, as this implies there was rapport of some kind and at least two speakers. When negotiations concluded, Maggie was relegated to light dusting on Tuesdays and Fridays. She seemed satisfied by this, and Felix

remembers suspecting that, for all her protesting, she was in no more of a position to leave than he.

In an ideal world, Maggie begins each day by patiently sorting through her emails, red-lacquer claws wrapped around a vast mug of tea. At her desk a strong work ethic grips her, setting her face into a mask of concentration. Blue eyes narrow. Thin lips seal tight. Loose strands of light blonde hair are dealt with swiftly where they stray across her face.

When Michael is late, however, she is forced to begin the day with his photocopying. Long talons tap the cheap plastic cover of the machine while it makes its own Monday protests beside her. Sometimes, if the photocopier is taking particularly long, she touches up her make-up in a hand mirror while she waits. Tiredness vanishes from her pale face beneath a mixture of concealer and rouge; a clown, all set for another day at the circus. He smiles to himself at the comparison, before wondering what that might make him.

Staring around him at what could be any morning of any week in the last five years of Mondays, he wonders what Maggie would do if they ran out of teabags, or if the photocopier began working properly, or what would happen if Michael was actually on time for work one day.

His friend cuts a dark silhouette as he hurries past the office window. The cold air chases after him, his black pea coat fluttering in the wind. Inside the office, he strides to Felix's desk, shrugging the coat from around his slight shoulders. Its absence reveals his white slim-fit shirt, navy blue tie, and a pair of grey trousers that Felix has long considered a touch too tight for the office. The coat flaps like a great pair of wings from around him.

"Morning," says Felix tentatively.

"My head feels like a Greek Tragedy."

Aside from the fact that he is dressed for work, the casual observer might be forgiven for thinking Michael has come straight from a bar. By the unforgiving brightness of the office lights his features seem pale, made sharp by his dark hair, scraped into a tight bun behind his head. His eyes are thin, cheeks slender, narrow nostrils quivering as they filter the scents of printer ink, carpet cleaner and stale dust that make up their

surroundings.

“Have you slept yet?”

“Yes.” Michael seems to reconsider. “Briefly.”

“You’re hopeless.”

“There’s always hope.”

“Three years of studying philosophy and you sound like a fortune cookie.”

Friday night swims behind Felix’s eyes; shining spirit bottles, the shadows in the bar’s rafters and the rush of the sea filling his head. He struggles to recall the face of the woman with whom Michael spent the best part of the evening, and most probably the rest of the weekend. For a moment he thinks he places her; sitting at the bar, legs crossed, a small, black dress hugging her hips, before the lights, and perhaps drink, distort her face into obscurity.

Then Mr. Coleson is standing in the doorway of his office, except instead of booming laughter the Ringmaster is tapping his watch. The gesture is empty, grown meaningless from years of repetition, but it prompts apologies from Michael and an immediate start to his working day.

The clouds break just before lunchtime. It is April, the month of showers, and Southampton’s are as cold and wet as anywhere Felix knows. He spends his morning scanning profiles for suitable job applicants. It is a thankless task. The hours stretch on, during which time he wonders where he went wrong. For three glorious years he had lived the dream at university. It had given him purpose, direction, an aim. The first week he spent drunk. The second he spent recovering, from both the drink and his leg, which he injured slipping down a flight of stairs in a club. He remembers little of the first week, or the ensuing three years, all lost in a sea of liquor. He does remember feeling hopeful and happier than he has ever been, at a time when the rest of the country was struggling to make ends meet. He had even managed a degree at the end, although it hadn’t been easy getting there. He owes that much to the city, at least.

And there it is. ‘At the end’. There had been no afterwards, no fourth year. University had come to its champagne-popping, Graduation Ball finish and abandoned him, with

nothing but a piece of paper and a false sense of hope to show for it.

After work, Felix retraces his steps through the city. The pavement is long and narrow, a pier leading first to the city centre and then the docks beyond. If he walks south through the city, or south-east, or south-west, he will come to water. There is no escaping the sea, which laps its salty tongue against the city and the people who live there.

A low wall follows one side of the pavement, barely more than knee-height, separating the street from the park grounds beyond. The stone feels cool and gravelly against the backs of his legs when he veers from the pavement to perch on it. Overhead, heavy clouds fill the bright sky, spears of sunlight struggling to pierce the swollen grey, reminding him of the hymns he used to sing when he was a boy at St. Barnaby's. Divine chariots could roll through those clouds, steeds snorting, thunder spilling from the spokes of the wheels.

"Thank God for Fridays, and men like Michael."

Opposite him there is a bus stop, behind him the green expanse of East Park. On his left a man sits cross-legged on the ground. The man's face is long, his eyes half-closed. Hands twist arthritically into the hollows of his overcoat, which is wrapped loosely around him like a second skin, ready to be sloughed. It seems impossible to accurately guess his age. From the look of his face, he might be in his forties. Felix has never seen fit to ask.

"Hello, Sam."

The man stirs slowly, seeming to come back to himself. He glances down, to a handful of change littering the pavement, then right, then up, to where Felix is sitting on the wall. His lidded eyes narrow, then flicker wide.

"Felix!"

He is not sure what first drove him to strike up conversation with Sam, when they spoke one evening last Christmas. He supposes he felt sorry for him. It was two below freezing outside and Sam made an abject sight, huddled beside the wall in the same tired coat he's wrapped in now. He offered to buy the man a hot drink, and they found a café, not far from the park, down an alley at the bottom of East Street. Sam does not

like crowds, and Felix does not like what Christmas does to people. So the café became their haunt, their private place where for a short while each week they could escape the eyes and ears of the city. They have been going for coffees there together ever since.

“You’ll catch your death, sitting out here. Aren’t you wet?”

“I’m waiting,” says Sam.

“Waiting for what?”

“The angels.” Sam stares behind Felix as he speaks. “The angels are coming.”

Felix follows his gaze to a statue, standing at his shoulder. In each hand she clutches a wreath. His eyes travel from her outstretched arms, past her proud face, down the flowing contours of her robes to the base on which she stands. More flowers have been placed in bouquets around her feet and he realises with a twinge of guilt that she is a memorial. Though the flowers partly obscure it, he sees a plaque, and written on it some words, partially hidden by red rose petals.

He reads the words ‘Officers,’ ‘Duty’ and ‘Titanic’ before a young man trips, or is pushed, and falls into the flowers. Mad laughter fills Felix’s ears as the man staggers to his feet and flees the broken bouquets with his friends.

Clouds slide before the sun, turning the statue ebony, where a moment before she seemed quite green. Verdigris-copper; the colour he imagined the sea here to be, before he first saw Southampton’s waters. Her austere face reflects his; flesh mirrored in forged metal.

“The rain,” says Sam, smiling brightly. Black stubs glisten in his gums. “They love the rain. The water. They sing of it. I’m waiting. Beautiful voices. I’m waiting.”

“Do you need to wait here? I thought we could go for a drink. My treat.”

“It has been a slow day at the office...” Pinching the scattering of coins one by one from the pavement, Sam places them in his coat pocket, before turning back to the memorial. With his face upturned he could be a small boy, wide-eyed, swamped by his father’s coat. “Yes, then, let’s.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, yes.” He breaks into a smile. “She’ll wait. I could use a cup of something hot.”

Felix looks up one last time at the winged silhouette, thin against the budding backdrop of East Park. A shaft of light illuminates the grey-green hollows of her face, with its tight lips, small nose and empty eyes. Then he hops from the wall, his white shirt blossoming grey with rain, and if it seems to him that the statue turns to face him as he leaves, he knows he is mistaken; a shaft of light, making movement where there can surely be none.

Hands pink from the cold clutch the wall for purchase as Sam struggles to his feet. Reaching down, Felix helps him from the pavement. The hands are much smaller than his own, and hard where they press into his palms. As they walk off together in the direction of East Street, he knows a cup of coffee cannot save those hands. Still, for an hour or two it might help keep them warm.

Chapter Two

Over the next few weeks, Felix feels drawn to the statue as he passes it by on his way into work and home again. In the mornings he has no time to stop and stare, but that does not prevent him from glancing her way as he walks through the shadow of East Park to London Road. Dawn illuminates her silhouette with its cold light, so that her slender arms appear severe, her skin sheer black and as devoid of warmth as the rest of the night-chilled city.

In the evenings she bathes in a different light, and seems the more content for it. Dusk draws a coppery green to the sculpted shallows of her face and robes, an oceanic tint dredged from the depths of the black bronze. It is during this time that she seems most radiant; an angel as he has always understood angels to be, and on more than one occasion he finds himself wondering why such statues are so often shaped like seraphim. It seems the nature of man to surround himself with Heaven, as though by doing so the world might seem more divine, or less hellish, or simply better. He sees only metal, forced into the shape of something that it is not.

When five o’clock on Friday finally arrives, the office empties. Felix remembers speaking to Michael, confirming their customary drinks, then walking home through the city. The high street stretches out before him; an endless parade of shop-fronts, multiplying in the gloom. It has stopped raining, although only recently. The ground

glitters black with puddles.

At his flat, he finds leftover lasagne and a half-drunk bottle of red in the kitchen. The mince is grey, the cheese rubbery, but as the dish rotates in the microwave it slowly becomes more appetising, until the aroma of hot fat and melted béchamel makes his insides moan.

Taking himself to the balcony, he sits until the wine is gone, his stomach full, the sky a little softer at the edges. When the bottle is empty, he heads inside to get washed and changed, but not before undoing his tie and releasing it to the sky. The wind snatches the fabric, fluttering, from his hand, and does not give it back.

The walk to Ocean Village passes him by. One moment he is leaving his flat and crossing Queen's Park towards the water. The next moment, he is standing outside a bar. There are a number of bars and restaurants by the marina, each as busy as the next. Laughter spills into the cold night, which has fallen without him realising.

He follows the murmur of conversation towards the nearest of the buildings. Orange light pours from its interior into the darkness outside. One side of the bar is mostly glass doors and these are open to the night air. He makes out the languid shape of smokers, reclining in the cold, and wonders whether Michael is among them. He will be on the smoking terrace or at the bar itself.

As he enters the building he is hit by a wave of warmth and sound. Voices buzz in his ears, and laughter, and the unmistakable clink of bottles against glass. He smells cologne and wine and the freshly-chopped fruit they are slicing at the bar to put in cocktails.

"What time do you call this?" says Michael, turning as Felix approaches. He is sitting at the counter opposite two towering drinks.

"More like what do you call those?" The drinks at the bar are fiercely red, served in a fat glass brimming with fruit and ice.

"Alcohol." Grinning, Michael slides one of the drinks towards him. "Sea Breeze, I believe."

He sits beside Michael and takes a sip through one of several straws. The taste is sharp, though not unpleasant. He relishes the sensation of the cold liquid and the warmth of

the alcohol inside it.

"Sorry I'm late," he says, withdrawing his mouth from the straw.

"Your excuse, Mr. White?"

Felix shrugs. "I was eating."

"The world?"

"I was hungry," he says, smiling.

"Aren't we all," mutters Michael, scouring the crowds behind Felix. His heady aftershave fills Felix's nose. "And thirsty, from the looks of things."

"What?"

"I'd know those wine lips anywhere. You are betrayed. One glass or two? Couldn't wait to get started, I suppose?"

He realises that Michael is referring to the red wine he drank earlier that evening. "You've found me out," he says, removing the straws from his drink and taking a large mouthful. Idly, he wonders how badly his lips are stained. He hears Michael laughing, sees his face creasing up over the rim of his glass, then the drink burns down his throat and he does not hear or see anything distinctly for the rest of the night.

Michael's delight echoes across the bar. Felix hears genuine laughter, the kind that bubbles up from deep within before spilling like foam into the air. There is nothing stilted about the expressions on people's faces. Their smiles are savage, eyes sparkling, faces freed from conscious thought and consequence. All across Southampton, people are flocking to clubs and pubs to lose themselves beneath the stresses of modern life.

"Outside." Michael's breath is heavy in Felix's ear and down his neck. "Outside, I need a smoke."

They move from the bar, where Michael has been speaking with a woman, and onto to the smoking terrace overlooking the marina. As they step outside, the cold is bracing. Shivers slip down Felix's spine.

The calm takes his breath away. The blackness, too, stops him where he stands; a stretch of uninterrupted dark, which he knows to be the sea and the sky, though he

cannot tell them apart. This is why they come here in the evenings, time and time again to the bar beside the sea: to drink and laugh and lose themselves in the clear breath of the ocean.

He half listens as Michael tells him about the woman at the bar. There is a name, an age, a rough score out of ten. It is a story he has heard a hundred times before. He is listening to other things: the wind, the sea, an irregular fluttering sound overhead, which he supposes is gulls, settling into the grooves of the building to roost for the remainder of the night. Gradually his eyesight grows familiar with the darkness and he makes out other details; gradients of grey spilling through the cloud-cover, tiny flashes of light like a sea of scales, where moonlight catches the waves, and small shapes in the distance, more gulls gliding silently in the night. They drink and smoke and laugh until they can do none of these things any more and then they leave. Arm-in-arm, one silhouette against the night, they struggle into the back of a taxi.

The city streams past them, reduced to small lights, blurred lamps, an endless stretch of black that is the sky, beneath which buildings squat like old men with dour faces stationed by the sea. Felix sees his friend in flashes of illumination: strawberry stains down his white shirt, his eyes thin and wet with laughter, hair loose over his face where it has freed itself from the knot behind his head. In minutes, they are standing outside Felix's block of flats. Michael pushes a crumpled note from his back-pocket into the driver's hand. As the taxi pulls away, Felix and he stumble inside.

The brightness of the foyer burns their eyes. For what seems like forever they try to work the lift. Michael falls asleep in one corner, his face pressing against the tarnished metal walls, before Felix abandons the lift for broken. Dragging his friend to his feet, they make the long climb up the stairwell to the top floor.

When they reach his flat, Michael crawls from the corridor to the sofa and falls face down into the cushions. Felix waits until he can hear his friend snoring before taking himself to bed. He does not have to wait long. Stripping, he collapses into the coldness of the covers and closes his eyes.

His rest is fitful. More than once he wakes, entangled in his duvet, as though he has been thrashing inside it. When his bed becomes too hot, he wanders into the kitchen for a glass of water. The coolness of the rest of the flat is refreshing against his slick skin.

He fills a second glass, which he leaves for Michael, on the floor beside the sofa. His friend is facing away, curled into his knees, clutching a leather cushion like a swimming float to his chest. He has shed his shirt, and his shoulder-blades jut sharply from the whiteness of his back above the harsh track of his spine. The thought of his face, were he to wake suddenly and find Felix standing nude over him, draws quiet laughter in the dark.

A strange sense of dissonance runs through Felix, as though the sky or the city under it is shifting. The laughter dies on his lips, leaving a hollow feeling in his chest. All of a sudden he feels ludicrous, standing here naked in the moonlight beside the oblivious form of his friend. Turning, he hurries from the room.

Falling back into bed, he floats through the space between awareness and dreams. The sound of Michael's deep breaths fill his ears, echoing those of the sea outside. Another noise accompanies it; soft, like a bird crooning, and he imagines the gulls again, settling into the gutters above Ocean Village. Something slightly rotten stings his nostrils.

He has had a pleasant evening. If he is sure of nothing else, he knows this. Friday nights are always satisfying, when for a few hours each week it is possible to forget the rest of the world, drink, laugh and be content. The feeling is quite cathartic. He remembers the New Forest coven he researched for a university project; women who professed to channel the spirit of the Devil, who lived and breathed his name, while they raced naked through the trees. If it is the Devil who delights in dancing, who granted those women freedom from the strictures of their sorry lives, then he was there tonight, feet scratching out steps against the floor, tattered wings outstretched beneath his arms –

Rolling away from the wall, he turns his face to the cold side of the pillow and finds himself staring at a silhouette in the doorway.

For a few uncertain seconds he flaps like a newborn chick in his bed covers, before remembering that he is not alone in the flat. It is impossible to see Michael properly, but he makes out his friend's thinness, his slender arms, the angular profile of his face in the darkness.

"Michael?" he says, but the man is already moving away down the hallway. Sinking

back into the covers, his head heavy, he wonders whether he should go after him, and with the memory of the night fresh in his mind falls into the blackness of sleep.

UNUSUAL FICTION

LYNNWOOD – MILD GOTHIC HORROR, MYSTERY

FINALIST IN THE PEOPLE'S BOOK PRIZE

The unthinkable is happening in Lynnwood – a village with centuries of guilt on its conscience.

Who wouldn't want to live in an idyllic village in the English countryside like Lynnwood? With its charming pub, old dairy, friendly vicar, gurgling brooks, and its old paths with memories of simpler times.

But behind the conventional appearance of Lynnwood's villagers, only two sorts of people crawl out of the woodwork: those who hunt and those who are prey. Visitors are watched by an entity between the trees where the Dark Ages have endured to the twenty-first century. Families who have lived behind stone walls and twitching curtains know that the gusts of wind blowing through the nearby alluring Forest bring with them a stench of delightful hunger only Lynnwood can appease.

You can also buy this book in an omnibus edition, *Three British Mystery Novels*

Reviews

"A dark and disturbing horror story set in a picturesque village. Full of rich description, it depicts the horrifying, ravenous secret lurking beneath the surface of the village. I would recommend this to fans of classic English horror as well as fans of Stephen King."

Lucy O'Connor, Waterstones bookseller, UK

"A quintessentially British folk horror chiller, with an escalating power of dread that is rendered deftly. A new voice in British horror, that you'll want to read, has entered the field."

Adam Nevill, Author of Apartment 16 and The Ritual

"The plot line is new and exciting, I won't say any more about that because I don't want to give it away! But I know I was surprised more than once at what was

happening. If you are looking for a good book, definitely pick up this one.”

Alison Mudge, Librarian, USA

“...A dark journey not only of the mind, but of the soul. This beautifully crafted tale of the horror that lurks in a picturesque English village is hopefully the first of many to come from this brilliant young author. Mr. Brown’s extraordinary talent is evident as he paints a virtual feast for the reader with eloquently chosen prose in this powerfully engaging novel.”

Nina D’Arcangela

“An exciting, on the edge of your seat gothic that will have readers begging for more.”

Rosemary Smith, Librarian and Cayocosta Book Reviews

“An exciting début from a new young writer with a dark imagination. Thomas Brown’s beautifully written novel proposes a modern gothic forest far from the tourist trail, a place filled with strange events and eerie consequences.”

Philip Hoare, historian of the New Forest, UK

“It was a pretty creepy story. I kept thinking along the premise of the book ‘It’ by Stephen King with an English twist.”

Naomi Blackburn, A Book and a Review Blog

“This book was great! I thought I would give it a try, but when I picked it up I couldn’t put it down! It was a quick read, and the story was so creepily wonderful. I loved the author’s writing style - the words flowed perfectly. Reading this was less like reading a book and more like watching the movie in my mind’s eye. Fantastic! I highly recommend it! I can’t wait to see what else Thomas Brown has in store for readers in the future.”

Laura Smith, Goodreads Reviewer

“This is really rather good.

“Can we talk about the thing I loved most first? The writing. Oh, my word, the writing. It was the sort of writing that makes you marvel at how good it is, flowing and swirling and building until it’s created whole worlds of dread and fear around you.

“The story itself is fairly simple, though it is given a new dimension through being told out of order, with flashbacks and the recovery of lost memories being a major part of the storytelling. Lynnwood wouldn’t be nearly so creepy or scary if told straightforwardly, from beginning to end.

“This book is very good indeed, if you want to be actually horrified, yet spellbound as well. The beauty of the language contrasts with the horror of the events and it all works together very well...I’ve said before that it’s hard to review books that are genuinely, objectively good. I’ve always found it harder to discuss things I like. So just trust me that this is good, and go buy it, will you?”

Caitlin Blanchard, Reviewer, UK

“It’s a well-crafted tale of horror in a quaint, remote English village, that reminded me of gothic horror classics, and gave off a disturbing, claustrophobic feel. Excellent writing, and a plot that surprised me and chilled me to the bone.”

Majanke Verstraete, Reviewer, Belgium

“Lynnwood, a debut novel by Thomas Brown, is an absorbing, atmospheric dip into mystery, suspense and horror.

“This short novel is set in and around the English village of Lynnwood, which, although only a dozen miles from Southampton, is buried deep in the New Forest. It is an ancient village and to outward appearances, is an idyllic place to live. Freya has lived there all her life, originally with her parents, then her husband, Robert and their children. When the story begins, Robert is no longer on the scene and almost immediately, one begins to feel that all is not well in this beautiful village. As the story progresses, we learn about some of the myths attached to the area - these appear to be echoed in dreams being experienced by Freya and some of the people she knows. Freya’s son, George, has had some strange experiences down by the disused railway tunnel and speaks to his mother of a “friend” who dwells in the tunnel.

“To tell more of the story would spoil it for other readers, but I will say that this is a well-written piece. The descriptions of the Forest are so good; Thomas Brown is able to create a setting which comes alive. He builds the suspense gradually, until the chill creeps from the pages and you wonder what exactly the mystery behind the strange happenings in Lynnwood is.

"I will certainly be looking out for more books by Thomas Brown!"

Angela Thomas, Reviewer, UK

"When I started reading this one, it stopped me in my tracks. Holy. Cow. There is a young and unknown author, telling a tale with the eloquence, stylishness and vivid atmosphere of a seasoned Poppy Z. Brite and Anne Rice. Seriously – the way Brite and Rice evoke Louisiana and the Deep South, he paints a vivid picture of the New Forest into your very soul. A dark picture, and, I take it back, he doesn't paint it, he carves it into you with a knife. It takes skill to scare this here book lady: I've devoured dark fiction of any kind since I was about 9, from the classics to the vilest splatterpunk, and I thought, I'm dead inside, man. Dead. I can count on one hand the books that truly made me pull up the duvet to my nose at night and stare into the shadows, or that enchanted me with their ability to create a film in my head or punch me straight in the guts. This is one of them. The way it morphs from the quaint and picturesque to the feral is deeply unsettling and fascinating in equal measure, making you question how stable our sense of civilisation really is. It has the earthy, eerie folklore flavour of Adam Nevill, Clive Barker and the Wicker Man, in spookiness easily rivalling Susan Hill and Henry James. Yet Brown's voice is powerfully and uniquely his own. An incredible debut and an author I'll be keeping an eye out for! And I'll be buying a hardcopy for my collection of doom!"

Patty Dohle, Waterstones Bookseller, UK

"I read this book in two sittings, a fast read, and I found it to be very interesting. A dark gothic type of tale that will have you chilled to the bones. A quaint little town that has people going missing in the Midwinter each year, this has been going on for a long time. Outer appearances show Lynnwood to be a nice little village with nice people, an ideal place to live, away from the hustle and bustle of a big city. But not all is what it appears to be as an evil lurks beneath the surface of this village. It took me awhile to figure out what was actually going on, as the author's writing was very poetic and gave nothing away. This is the type of book to read curled up in front of a fire, just don't be alone...I enjoyed it immensely."

Kathleen Kelly, Reviewer, USA

"This book took me a little while to get into. I'm not a horror fan in the sense that I

read it very often. I will say that I love my YA and my Fantasy/Dark Fantasy first and foremost. However, I love reading other genres too, but I gravitate towards YA/Fantasy/ParaRomance. However, now that my warning has been stated, I will say that this book was pretty enjoyable. I would say it is a cross between, for me, Torchwood meets Stephen King. Which was really interesting when you see it meshed together.

“The story had a good flow and a nice steady pace. At 192 pages it isn’t terribly long but it was enough to get the story told and to do it well. I read about the author as he is an MFA student. Since I am heading into my application season ... I do my best to check out what graduates and current students are putting out there. I will say this: I can see why they accepted him into the program. His writing was clean, fluid, and all the blocks fell into place with each other.

“This is an exceptionally well written story that I really enjoyed reading. It is set in the UK with their style of speaking, etc. So, if you aren’t familiar with some of the subtle changes between the US and the UK English this will definitely teach you a little bit. But, I felt that it strengthened the story and really brought a great connection between the characters and myself. I definitely enjoyed reading it. The horror was there and he definitely reminded me of King, but the best parts of him. Brown isn’t overly wordy but does give good description. I loved Stephen King’s *The Talisman* and if you’re a fan of King ... well, to put it nicely, we all know how long winded Mr. King can get. Brown is nothing like that. While he gives you great narration and description, he doesn’t make you go, ‘oh my god ... can we get to the point already?’ He goes off and adds the beauty of the words but doesn’t get into the long winded mode some writers can do.”

Amanda Harris, Reviewer, USA

“It’s difficult to pinpoint what makes horror drip from the spine of *LYNNWOOD* without spoiling its main course. It disturbs without resorting to a single horror cliché. Upon first glance, *LYNNWOOD* dictates the story of Freya, mother of two, who lives in the quaint English countryside. Blessed by the fortune left from deceased parents, Freya spends much of her time wandering the town and surrounding forest. Without the sparse mentions of modern luxuries and dates in the recent years, the simplicity of the villagers’ lifestyles would leave readers believing this story occurred

in the middle ages rather than the modern age.

“Using terminology and British spellings for words, the atmosphere is strengthened by the expertise of the author’s word choice. The descriptions are so crisp that I could nearly smell the bacon and egg breakfast that Freya cooked and gorged herself with every morning or hear Freya’s footsteps through her well-travelled path through the forest. I felt the hairs on my arms prickle when the setting switched to the abandoned railroad tunnel.

“The frequent flashbacks into Freya’s blissful childhood illuminated the cracking sanity and simple ‘wrongness’ of the villagers’ behaviour when the focus shifted back to present day. A hunger builds from the first scene until the last and as a reader I didn’t feel satisfied until the last page was turned in this psychological horror.

“And so I leave you with a review that aims to tease your taste buds rather than stuff you with fillers (mostly because its too easy to spoil the surprise). As with any horror book done well, how the story unfolds matters as much as the content and this book doesn’t disappoint.”

Lizzy Lessard, Reviewer, USA

“This atmospheric chiller is perceptibly menacing from the first sentence. Set in the idyllic village of Lynnwood, set on the edge of the New Forest in England, the truth of the village’s heritage is glimpsed through the eyes of villager, Freya. She discovers the charred remains of a pig on a morning walk with her dog, and this stirs a hunger in her. Freya has been a vegetarian for years, ever since her husband, inexplicably and suddenly left her; and this renewed hunger for meat is disturbing.

“The villagers are a superstitious lot, friendly to the tourists that come to visit, but always glad to see them leave. However, there have been disappearances of visitors and villagers alike over the years; put down to being either lost in the Forest, or the victim of the legendary Bauchan, the hungry spirits of the local brook and Forest since the fourteenth century. These skeletal creatures can be seen only from the corner of the eye slipping between the trees of Forest. But that’s what they are; a local legend; a story told to children to keep them safe from falling into the waters of Bauchan Brook. Or are they? As Midwinter draws nigh, it is said that the hunger of the Bauchan intensifies, and the villagers can do naught but lock their doors tight against the

night, peeking through drawn curtains with fear filled eyes.

“Freya is friends with the vicar; Joan Andrews, a seventy-one year old, steady woman who whispers of a dark recurring dream she has each night. Of a fly faced woman that draws ever nearer, one step closer with each dream. Freya convinces her to confront her night-time fears by visiting the clearing in the Forest where the dream occurs. Together they go to the Forest, but the vicar never returns. Bereft by the loss of Ms. Andrews, Freya seeks solace with her best friend, Catherine, the local vintner, both drinking large quantities of wine to drown their loneliness and growing sense of dread. Then, one day, Freya goes to Catherine’s house to find her gone.

“Freya, in clearing our the old Vicarage, comes across diaries of those who came before, and learns of the history of Lynnwood. That its first years were filled with starvation; a hunger so deep and desperate that some committed unspeakable acts. And that the hunger remains to this day.

“This gripping gothic novella drew me in and kept me turning the pages until the horrific revelations of the last pages. This debut novella is a fast read, good for both young adults and adults that enjoy horror that is more edgy than gory.”

Maria Wolff, Librarian, USA

“I gave this book 5 stars for being well-written...The village of Lynnwood is tucked away in England’s New Forest, a bucolic and slow-moving locale with much evidence of its historic past. Indeed, the schoolchildren attend classes in a building constructed several centuries ago for that very purpose. But the bucolic peace of Lynnwood is a misnomer, or rather an illusion cast upon the villagers, for there are inexplicable forces in the Forest and in the abandoned railway tunnel, forces that cause the inhabitants to disappear.”

Mallory Heart Reviews, USA

“I really enjoyed Lynnwood, and will be recommending it a lot. Really well written gothics are kind of rare, and such well written debuts are not to be missed.

“Hard to believe this is a first novel. Thomas Brown writes with a tremendously polished style and creates scenes that you can not only see, but also smell and even taste. He is also a master at building suspense and horror. I read this book quickly

because I had to see what was coming next, and it was a chilling Gothicky experience--delightful! This book would appeal to fans of Shirley Jackson and MR James, really to anybody who likes a good Gothic spiced with horror and a lot of style."

Sue Buchman, Librarian, USA

Preview of Lynnwood, by Thomas Brown ISBN 9781907230387 (print), 9781907230424 (epub)

CHAPTER ONE

When Freya discovered the pig's remains, on the third of September, they stirred unseemly urges deep inside her. She often circled the village with Eaton, keeping to the surrounding paths, and this day was no different. They passed beneath the alder trees, which grew near Mawley Bog, and around the outskirts of Lynnwood. It was a Sunday, both in name and temperament; an air of sleepiness hung over the village, its inhabitants reluctant to rise, save a nameless few, undaunted by the hour.

As she moved beneath the trees, her thoughts turned to the village's history. There were few in Lynnwood who did not know it well. The village dated back to the fourteenth century when settlers first flocked in real numbers to the Forest, and by all accounts it had changed very little since. Ancient oaks hemmed in the village, and beech and yew and holly. Together they kept the place their own. There was a single bus that went as far as Lymington, which left and returned once each day, and one long, vermicular road. These were the only ways in and out of the village. Many visited the Forest each year, drawn by the herds of wild ponies, the allure of the woodland and its seasonal beauty; the wild gladiolus, found nowhere else in Britain; the carpet of late summer heathers, a sliding scale of purples; even snowdrops, when winter was nigh and the days were at their shortest. It was no wonder that those who ventured into Lynnwood chose to remain. What sane man or woman would want to leave such a place; the sweet, isolating scent of flowering viola, the old Forest paths, the light?

Freya set a brisk pace that morning, her hands buried firmly in her Parka pockets. Tall, dark green wellingtons protected her jeans from the worst of the mud and blonde hair spilled out beneath a faux coonskin cap. It fluttered fiercely in the wind.

The dog, Eaton, caught the scent first and as they broke from the tree line he slipped under the wooden gate, bounding into the adjoining field. At first Freya was

unconcerned. Even for a Lurcher, Eaton was a spirited animal. She had bought him for her thirty-fifth birthday, almost eight years ago, and he had been a part of the family ever since. She could only imagine how exciting the world seemed to him and his keen canine senses; the scent of rabbits, of edible things concealed in the grass, even other dogs, a number of which they would usually encounter each morning. Even when she caught an acrid tang on the air, she gave it little thought. McCready must have been burning things. He often ventured into the village, his hands still black, his clothes stinking with smoke.

“What’ve you found, boy?” she said, smiling into the wind. “Yes, aren’t you a clever dog! What’s that, then?”

The corpse of the pig stopped her in her tracks. The lingering damp of Mawley Bog was replaced by the smokiness of scorched flesh, which carried on the breeze. Shivering, she brought her hand to her mouth. Fat had bubbled and popped across heat-cracked bone, then cooled in slick, waxy pools between the ribs. Even the surrounding grass was dead; a crisp, ashen elf ring. Flies hovered over the corpse, accountable for the buzzing sound that filled her head as her eyes settled on the skull. It grinned back at her with a sooty, feral smile.

* * *

She left McCready’s field quickly, dragging Eaton from the pig by his collar. Arriving home, she first cleaned the dog with a towel. Then she headed upstairs to the bathroom. She wouldn’t usually shower after each walk, but that day it felt important. Her skin still shivered, her body unclean, the stink of burned flesh haunting her nostrils.

The blasted pig had deeply unsettled her, but worse were the feelings it had stirred: loathing, fear and the fluttering of hunger. She told herself that she had been mistaken. She had felt a ripple of revulsion, perhaps; the knotting of her stomach at the sight of such a horrid, unexpected thing in the grass, but not hunger! The very thought of bringing her mouth to the charred flesh, of tasting it, cold and crisp on her tongue, was monstrous.

Hot water splashed her skin. For what seemed like the longest time she stood under the spray. Eyes closed, she relished the water as it ran down her body. An antique

mirror hung on the opposite wall from the shower, rectangular in shape and framed with golden ornament. Green Men studied her from the frame, their faces wreathed with vines. Her mother had been especially fond of the mirror, and many were the times Freya had stood in the doorway, when just a little girl, watching the older woman as she made herself presentable; hiding the human beneath lipstick and blusher and long, black lashes.

There was no hiding as Freya stepped from the shower, a smudge of exposed pink in the reflection. She glanced at herself only once, then dressed with her back to the ornament. Birds sang whimsically outside the window while she clothed herself.

Changed and refreshed – physically, if nothing else – she returned to the kitchen. She filled the kettle and prepared a drink, moving stiffly, as though dazed. Eaton followed her around the room, an auburn shadow at her feet.

She had not eaten meat since Robert left her. Though she encouraged her children to eat it, she had not touched it herself for over ten years. She associated the food with him and their last meal together, which stuck so vividly in her mind.

Steam whistled from the kettle's spout like the scream of burning swine. Moving the kettle from the hob until the shrill sound trailed off, she poured her tea and drank it. They said that tea was good for dealing with shock. She poured another, which she supped more slowly, savouring the sweet warmth that rose from the surface of the liquid.

* * *

It was a dizzying experience to walk the frosted village in December. Cobbled pavements were slippery and hard with ice. The warmth of mulled liquor and brandy burned throats while the cold weather bit red cheeks. Carollers moved from cottage to cottage, singing righteous songs in celebration of the season. Nor were theirs the only voices to be heard, for the night was Midwinter and on that night, without fail, the dogs of Lynnwood tossed back their heads and added their own anxious howls, their chorus carrying far over the New Forest. The skies were cloudless, the constellation Orion, the Hunter, visible as he chased his quarry through the blackness and the stars.

From the comfort of her front room, Freya watched, as she did every year, a small group of children finish carolling at Granary Cottage across the street. Their failing

voices were whisked away by the wind. The ancient hymns made her happy, infusing her with festive spirit. She wasn't a religious woman, like Ms. Andrews of the Vicarage, but it warmed her heart to see the children playing together. They skittered across the icy road, past the parked cars and street lights to the next cottage, and she turned from the window, the dark silhouette of her reflection doing likewise in the glass.

The house was lively, excitable. An air of anticipation filled the rooms, which she cheerfully attributed to Christmas. Baubles glittered like silvery apples on the potted pine tree in the corner. From the kitchen came the sizzling scent of roast chicken and the crisp, root aroma of potatoes. Her mouth became wet and anxious and she followed the smells and the sounds of cooking to their source.

Where the front room was dim, lit only by lamps and the flickering lights of the tree, the kitchen shone brightly. Exposed oak beams lined the ceiling, an AGA cooker – black from use, even then – dominating the back wall. Robert stood by the dinner table. He stooped to pour two glasses of white, the wine making delicious glugging sounds as it decanted.

“My favourite wine for my favourite woman,” he said, turning and pressing a glass carefully into her hand.

“I’m your woman now, am I?”

He grinned, teeth bared in mockery of an ape, and tapped his chest with his fist. “Now and always.”

“Misogynist,” she said, smiling and sipping from her glass.

“What can I say? I’m an animal.”

“You’re not the only one.” She nibbled his ear as she passed him, her breath sharp and zingy with the white. She tasted it against his lobe and on the air. He shivered bodily between her teeth.

They ate dinner quietly. Even when the dogs began to howl, the peace wasn't ruined. There was something beautiful and primal in the chorus of their cries. She decided then that they should get a dog of their own. He said it was a wonderful idea. Something loyal, to look after their little girl, Lizzie, and recently-born George. Both

slept upstairs, lulled by the lingering howls.

It was strange, how well she could recall the details of that meal. Every flavour seemed suffused in her tongue, taste memories; of moist chicken breast, succulent and spiced; of rich gravy, thick and salty; of those hot, slender vegetables, asparagus, still crunchy, and carrots slippery and soft. She ate and drank with abandon, her head thrown back, eyes closed, mouth agape, as if the bestial howls of the dogs erupted from her own throat –

* * *

She didn't see Robert again after that night. Though she could never forgive him for walking out on her, she had loved him once, enough to share a house, a life, to father her children, and the thought of abandoning that drew a roaring panic inside her. Feelings had been unfettered in that field, frightening and seductive, threatening her last memory of her husband with promises of crisp crackling, succulent flesh and dripping grease.

Alone in the kitchen, with only the dog as witness, she stepped slowly towards the black, cast-iron pan, hanging above the hob, and the bottle of cooking oil beside it.

When her children finally dragged themselves downstairs, almost an hour later, they were greeted by the sizzle of hot fat, the splutter of eggs and the rich, salty scent of fried bacon. They smiled sleepily at their mother and seated themselves at the dining table, oblivious to the half-eaten rasher at the bottom of the bin or the guilt behind their mother's eyes.

* * *

Though she did not know it then, Freya was not alone in her private distress. Nor was she the first in Lynnwood to suffer. Ms. Andrews, of the Vicarage, dreamt she saw a woman in the Forest with the face of a fly and great, glassy wings. Mr. Shepherd, at his bench one afternoon, crafted seven intricate brooches, each in the shape of a gaping maw, before he realised what he was doing or how long it had taken him. And McCready was woken one night by screaming. Following the sound to his sties he glimpsed a skeletal figure crouched over the body of one of his pigs. Neck craned to the night sky, it shrieked a ditty from McCready's own childhood:

Scads and 'tates, scads and 'tates.

Scads and 'tates, and conger.

And those who can't eat scads and 'tates,

Oh! they must die of hunger.

These things were not dwelt on. Dreams were disregarded, as dreams so often were, though Ms. Andrews took to wearing her rosary beads beneath the collar of her nightdress while she slept. Mr. Shepherd melted down the ugly, unsettling brooches, except for one, which he secreted into the bottom drawer beside his bed. And once McCready had finished the whisky that he saved for occasions such as this, he dragged the pig's carcass into an empty field, doused it with lighter fluid and burned it. Afterwards, when he woke quite suddenly, sweating and cold in his bed, he couldn't be sure that he had left his pillow at all.

Outside, as a new day broke across the blue autumn sky, the pig's blackened bones cooled in the grass, unobserved by all except one woman and her dog.

CHAPTER TWO

Having felt the playful nip of that hunger, which risked revealing something wild inside her, Freya clung to old habits, finding herself among the village congregation next Sunday. She held no special love for Allerwood Church, but like many of the village's residents she felt a hollowness inside; a quiet corner of her being, forever empty. Some felt this most at night, when their kitchen lights failed them, or when they passed through the Forest in the evening. It was a human thing, she knew, to fear this darkness. Theirs was an epicurean herd, grown fat and contented on life. They had no mind to be stripped of their lives at the trough, by death or any other means.

For others it was dogs that frightened them; the wet stink of their fur, or their animal howls, which carried so easily over Lynnwood. Like the darkness, they reminded of human things; race memories, rank and coppery, best left forgotten. The same swine of society heard the dogs' howls and they buried their faces deeper into their feed, and their lives went on in pleasant Lynnwood.

"The service seems busy this morning," Freya said, when she greeted their vicar, Ms. Andrews, on the church steps that morning.

“Indeed, the promise of winter brings many guilty gluttons to our doorstep.” The elderly woman smiled, then winked at Freya’s children. “Besides, the more the merrier. We need the bodies.”

“I’m sorry?”

“To warm the church, my dear. The building is old as anything in the village. Even filled it doesn’t hold heat well.”

Darkness held no fear for Freya; she who had been left in the dark already, and there was familiarity in the cries of the dogs that conjured up memories of her last night with Robert, when they had sat at their dining table and eaten to the chorus of howls. Rather, it was the fragility of that memory that kept her awake at night and in a moment of madness, alone in her kitchen, she had threatened that...

She left the old woman to her greetings, leading her children past the alcoves, where there were fewer people to disrupt. They slipped into the third-row pew and waited while the rest of Lynnwood’s church-going residents found their seats. The cruciform ground plan was typical of fourteenth-century traditions. Sitting in the third row, she had a clear view of the altar, the high place on which it rested and the transept at the head of the room. There was little of the ornament boasted by grander churches, but theirs was a practical parish. The pews were varnished oak. A table by the entrance held a vase of white-lipped lilies and the collection bowl. White plaster covered the walls and although some stained-glass windows overlooked the nave, these were of a simple design. It was a place of worship and nothing more; a church for a parish which needed spiritual nourishment, when the nights drew in and the dogs began to bay.

Beside her, George fidgeted in his seat. He looked distracted, she thought, as did his sister, their eyes staring but not seeing. She didn’t judge them. Church was no place for the wild spirits of children.

* * *

“Do I have to come?” Lizzie had said that morning, when Freya stepped into her room and flung open the curtains. The room was dark, stuffy and filled with a menagerie of shapes in the half-light; the products of her daughter’s art classes. It smelled of adolescence, and the perfumes used by teenage girls to mask it.

“Yes, darling,” she said. “This is family time.”

“But it’s pointless! You think there’s some All-Father sitting up there, nodding when you go to church and frowning when you’re bad? You think Dad lived by those beliefs? We’re not a parish of medieval sinners. No one believes in God anymore!”

“It doesn’t matter what you or anyone else believes,” she said, unlocking the window to let some air in. “It’s the done thing. The least we can manage is a Sunday, here and there.”

“This is stupid,” said Lizzie. “Mark Thomas’s parents take him to beer festivals, and Rachel’s mum cooks her three-course dinners when they need family time. With cheeseboards. And pâté starters.”

“You don’t like pâté, darling, and neither do I.”

“That’s not the point,” said Lizzie. “You’re not listening to me. I’m saying church isn’t normal any more.”

“Your skirt’s on the bannister,” said Freya, unfaltering. “You’ve got twenty minutes, young lady.”

* * *

Freya had heard it said once, when shopping with Robert in Lymington, that the hungry were quick to forget. This was true of the conversation; they were enjoying afternoon tea at a small café and the table beside theirs had entirely forgotten what it was they had ordered. She remembered the café well; the miniature sandwiches filled with wafers of smoked salmon, the lace tablecloths, even the serviettes, printed in patriotic colours and folded carefully for each customer by their place mat. People loved the café, as they loved all places where they could gorge themselves under the pretence of propriety. They were modern predators, snouts speckled not with blood but tea and breadcrumbs.

The saying was also true of Lynnwood, however. Perhaps that was why she had felt such guilt at her appetite, the Sunday she encountered the pig. She could not explain that morning’s weakness, which stood against everything she had upheld for over ten years, except that even as she remembered it her mouth began to fill with hot, wet anticipation. For the first time in a decade she had felt temptation, and she had

succumbed to it in a moment. They might not be medieval, as her daughter had suggested, but Freya had sinned, and while she continued to sin there was Allerwood Church. The Dark Ages, it seemed, had endured to the twenty-first century, hidden beneath the boughs of the trees and in their hungry hearts.

* * *

The sky was grey and heavy with cloud when they left the service. They took the gravel-stone path through the churchyard and around the back of the church. The little chips made crunching sounds beneath their feet, like hard, dry cereal between her teeth. The three of them moved amid the headstones.

As with most old parishes of its kind, an intimate, if not generous number of graves had sprung up in its grounds over the centuries. The very first graves, the earliest, were those nearest to the church. Some of them were little more than rock piles, their inscriptions long since eroded, or hidden beneath moss. These were the first settlers of Lynnwood, resting beneath its hallowed grounds, from where they might continue to keep a quiet watch over their village. There had been a petition to have the graves restored, she remembered, several years ago. Quite a number of signatures had been gathered from the village's more spiritual residents. They had a more than vested interest in the maintenance of the graves, she supposed, as regular attendees of the church.

Her signature had counted among those collected. She could still recall doe-eyed Ms. Andrews and Sam Clovely from the village council standing on her doorstep that morning; their beatific smiles as they talked to her about heritage, history and remembrance. She had signed, for what it was worth. They weren't bad people and nothing had come of the appeal anyway. Clovely had disappeared one night, halfway through the local campaign, and all the signatures with him. She struggled to remember the details, which were unclear in her mind, but seemed to think they had found a book of his – a journal – in which he had written of noises at his window, late into the night, like the scrabbling of rats or light-fingered children. The general consensus was that he couldn't have been of sound mind, the poor man. The money had gone towards refurbishing the village hall instead, and the leftovers used to fund some cookery classes there. She had attended one with Lizzie, in the spirit of the community. Her daughter seemed to have enjoyed the lesson well enough, though she

had found it lacking.

The further they walked from the church, the more recent the graves became. They were still old but their condition gradually improved. They stood higher and straighter in the soil and in many cases the names were still legible where they were engraved into the stone. The most recent dotted the outskirts of the churchyard. The names were still clear, some only a year or two old – if that. They must have been people she knew, to have been buried so recently, and yet she could think of only a handful of people who had passed away in this time. She inspected the family names on the nearest two headstones: Richards and Collins. They meant nothing to her and slipped easily from her mind.

They were almost at the gate when George wandered from the path. She waited while he approached the nearest memorial. For almost a minute he stood in front of the headstone, which was roughly his own height and fashioned after the stony style of its forbears. She couldn't see his face, standing as he was with his back to her, but she watched as he lifted his hand to touch the grey stone. The scene was strangely affecting, stirring something inside of her she couldn't explain. It might have been the sight of one so small, standing alone between the gravestones, or it might have been his fingers on the stone; the living crossing the boundary of the dead. It might have been something obscurer still; her flesh and blood remembering the forgotten. A bouquet of flowers rested at his feet and it brought her some relief to know that someone besides her little boy was caring for the graves. Someone in Lynnwood remembered the buried dead, even if she could not.

Lynnwood is also available in an omnibus edition, *Three British Mystery Novels* ISBN 9781907230738 (print), 9781907230745 (epub)

THE TRUE FRIEND – CLASSIC ITALIAN DRAMA, IN ENGLISH AND ITALIAN

True to Goldoni's mixture of comic wit and farce, the plot is a breathtakingly fast succession of twists and turns which only unravel in the very final lines with a surprise ending. Two friends are in love with the same young woman. Neither wants to place their friendship in jeopardy. How can love triumph without breaking off their friendship?

Goldoni explores the conflicts brought about when Florindo has to choose between Lelio, his best friend, and Rosaura, his best friend's fiancée. Added to this conundrum are the issues of whether Ottavio, the old miser, will provide a dowry and the mature Beatrice's unashamed incessant pursuit of Florindo.

The play is set in Bologna in Lelio's house. Florindo is a guest along with his faithful manservant. From the opening of the play, Florindo seeks to return home to Venice in order not to damage his friend's relationship. However, his departure is obstructed time and again by his hosts, leading to one complication after another.

From the beginning, the plot is intense and fast-moving with inversions fed into the action in quick succession. This creates suspense which continues throughout the play as potential marriage partners are switched back and forth until the very ending when the audience finally discovers what the main characters' destiny will be. Will love or friendship prevail?

The Venetian element is brought into this play through Florindo and his manservant, both Venetians. Apart from these two characters, all the others are portrayed as self-seeking, selfish and sly – whether servants or masters. The tension is kept at a constantly high level by the struggles between the characters. These struggles are not just brought about through love and friendship but are also generational and social. Furthermore, there is the added complication in the contrast of the characters' ideas of reality as they deceive one another. This creates dramatic irony and humour as the audience know more than any of the characters on stage.

The Italian text is taken from: Carlo Goldoni, *Tutte le opere*, a cura di Giuseppe Ortolani, Mondadori, Milano, 1935.

In *Memoirs* (Carlo Goldoni's autobiography), Goldoni states: "This play [*Il vero amico*]

is one of my favourites and I have had the greatest pleasure in seeing that the audience is of my opinion" - Chap. X

Review of the translation

"a great gift for students of Italian/English, for students of Goldoni and Italian theatre, or for theatre-lovers. Or for a true friend."

Words to good effect

Preview of the English text ISBN 9781907230011 (print), 9781907230349 (epub, English only)

Note: The print edition is parallel text Italian and English

A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS IN PROSE

First produced in Venice for the Carnival of 1750.

Dramatis Personae

FLORINDO, friend and guest of LELIO

OTTAVIO, elderly miser, father of ROSAURA

ROSAURA, intended bride of LELIO

COLOMBINA, her maid

TRAPPOLA, OTTAVIO's butler

TRIVELLA, FLORINDO's servant

LELIO, intended husband of ROSAURA

BEATRICE, advanced in years, LELIO's aunt and in love with FLORINDO

The action takes place in Bologna.

ACT ONE

SCENE I

Scene. A room in Lelio's house.

Florindo is alone. He paces the room in a pensive mood and then speaks:

Yes, one must be armed with fortitude. An heroic solution must be found. Friendship must prevail, and to true friendship one must sacrifice one's passion, one's happiness and even one's own life, if necessary.

(Calls). Ah, Trivella!

SCENE II

Enter Trivella.

TRIVELLA. Sir.

FLORINDO. Quick, gather my belongings, go to the post-stage and order a gig for midday.

TRIVELLA. Where to? If I'm allowed to ask.

FLORINDO. I wish to return to Venice.

TRIVELLA. So suddenly? Has some instance of bad luck come upon you? Have you stumbled upon someone disagreeable?

FLORINDO. For the time being, I'll say no more. I'll tell you all about it during the journey.

TRIVELLA. My dear master, forgive me if, as a servant, I venture too far; but you know I'm worthy of trust. You no doubt remember that, for this trip, your esteemed signor uncle gave you his consent and me the honour of serving you, on the grounds of my long service at your household. He had the goodness to state that I was the only person he could rely on, and that he entrusted you to my faithful servitude. I pray you, for

goodness' sake, to acquaint me with the reason for your discomfort, so that I may assure your signor uncle, that a sound cause is at the root of your hasty departure. If we leave now, it will certainly give rise to rumours.

FLORINDO. Dear Trivella, time gallops, and I cannot waste it in lengthy discussion about the reasons for my departure. Just for this time, be satisfied that I have acted upon my own good judgment. Go, order that gig.

TRIVELLA. Do the lady and gentleman of whom you are a guest know of your departure?

FLORINDO. They do not know, yet. I'll inform them succinctly, bid them goodbye, thank them and leave.

TRIVELLA. What do you suppose they'll say about your sudden decision?

FLORINDO. I'll say a letter from my uncle forces me to leave immediately.

TRIVELLA. Signora Beatrice will be upset by my master's departure...

FLORINDO. Signora Beatrice is worthy of my respect, and I hold her in reverence in the capacity of Lelio's aunt; but owing to her advanced age, her passion for me is ridiculous and embarrasses me infinitely.

TRIVELLA. But signor Lelio will be more upset than...

FLORINDO. Yes, Lelio is the dearest friend I have. It was for him, I came to Bologna. When he was my guest in my house in Venice, I treated him like a brother, and I swore true friendship to him. Now here I am in his house. I've been here nearly one month and he wants me to stay on, but I cannot remain. Quick, Trivella, go and order that gig.

TRIVELLA. But at least wait for signor Lelio to return home.

FLORINDO. Is he not at home now?

TRIVELLA. No, he isn't.

FLORINDO. Wherever can he be?

TRIVELLA. I heard that he has gone to show signora Rosaura a ring because she is to be his bride.

FLORINDO. (*Aside*). Ah, patience! (*To Trivella*). Go, waste no time. Quick, to the post-stage; it must be nearly midday.

TRIVELLA. Oh! It's three hours away. If you wish, you can go and visit signor Lelio at signora Rosaura's house.

FLORINDO. I don't have time. I can't stay.

TRIVELLA. To tell you the truth, signora Rosaura has shown the most courteous manners in your presence. In truth, she seemed in love with you, sir.

FLORINDO. Oh, heavens! Trivella, oh, heavens! Do not torment me further.

TRIVELLA. How? What do you mean?

FLORINDO. (*Restlessly*). The gig, for goodness' sake.

TRIVELLA. Why do you have the fidgets? You keep changing colour! Signora Rosaura has a strange effect on you.

FLORINDO. Away, away, less tittle-tattle. When a master gives orders, they must be carried out.

TRIVELLA. (*Gravely, as he starts to leave*). Forgive me.

FLORINDO. Where are you going?

TRIVELLA. To order the gig.

FLORINDO. Come here.

TRIVELLA. At your command.

FLORINDO. I exhort you, get one with a good seat.

TRIVELLA. If there is one...

FLORINDO. If you see signor Lelio, inform him of my departure.

TRIVELLA. Of course.

FLORINDO. Where will you look for him?

TRIVELLA. At his betrothed's house.

FLORINDO. At signora Rosaura's?

TRIVELLA. At signora Rosaura's.

FLORINDO. (*Pathetically*). If you see her, tell her I am indebted to her.

TRIVELLA. Should I tell her of your departure?

FLORINDO. No.

TRIVELLA No?

FLORINDO. Yes, yes...

TRIVELLA. What should I say?

FLORINDO. Tell her... No, no, don't say anything.

TRIVELLA. So you want to leave without her knowing?

FLORINDO. We should... Signora Beatrice is coming.

TRIVELLA. What stance should I take?

FLORINDO. Stand still; don't go anywhere.

TRIVELLA. Do you not want the gig any more?

FLORINDO. The gig, yes, quickly.

TRIVELLA. So...

FLORINDO. Now go, do not torment me.

TRIVELLA. (*Aside*). I am afraid my master is in love with signora Rosaura and that, so as not to harm his friend, he has resolved to leave. (He leaves).

SCENE III

Florindo alone.

I shall not leave without seeing my friend. I shall await his return and embrace him. But shall I leave without seeing Rosaura? Without bidding goodbye? Yes, these two different passions must be treated differently. Friendship must be cultivated through great tact. Love must be overcome with strength and great force. Here is signora Beatrice; I must conceal my suffering and appear cheerful so as not to arouse suspicion.

SCENE IV

Enter Beatrice.

BEATRICE. Good morning, signor Florindo.

FLORINDO. Your humble servant, signora Beatrice. I wish to pay my respects to you.

BEATRICE. For what reason did you summon me?

FLORINDO. I entreat you to excuse the inconvenience I have caused during my long stay, and I thank you for the kind consideration you have shown towards me. It will be with great pleasure that I shall see to anything you might need from Venice.

BEATRICE. What? In Venice? When?

FLORINDO. Any moment now. I have sent for a gig.

BEATRICE. You can't be serious.

FLORINDO. It is the truth, signora.

BEATRICE. But why all this sudden haste?

FLORINDO. A letter from my uncle bids me to go home immediately.

BEATRICE. Does my nephew know?

FLORINDO. I haven't told him yet.

BEATRICE. He will not allow you to leave.

FLORINDO. I hope he will not prevent me from doing so.

BEATRICE. If my nephew allows you to leave, I shall personally do everything in my power to detain you here.

FLORINDO. I'm at a loss for words. You speak in a manner I don't understand. For what reason do you wish to detain me here?

BEATRICE. Oh, signor Florindo! The time for pretence is over. You know my heart, you know my passion.

FLORINDO. You make advances I don't deserve.

BEATRICE. You must requite my love.

FLORINDO. That's exactly what I find slightly difficult.

BEATRICE. Yes, you must requite my love. A woman who has passed blushing age and opens her heart up to her beloved, doesn't deserve to be treated villainously.

FLORINDO. I did not prompt you to speak.

BEATRICE. I've held my tongue for a month, and now I can no more.

FLORINDO. If you had held your tongue for a month and a day, it could hardly have taken much more effort.

BEATRICE. I do not regret having spoken.

FLORINDO. No? Why?

BEATRICE. Because I take the liberty of believing you may love me yet.

FLORINDO. Signora, I must leave.

BEATRICE. Here is my nephew.

FLORINDO. He has arrived just in time. The sooner I bid him farewell, the sooner I shall be able to leave.

SCENE V

Enter Lelio.

LELIO. My friend, I've just heard the most surprising news from your servant. You want to leave? You want to leave me?

FLORINDO. Dear signor Lelio, if you love me, let me go.

LELIO. I do not know what to say. I had better let you leave.

BEATRICE. (*To Lelio*). And are you weak enough to let him go? Do you know why he is leaving us? For excessive civility. He told me that he has been our guest for a month now, and it is time he took his leave. Friends cannot treat each other so. Two months, four months, one year, what is the difference? You are master in our house. Is that not true?

LELIO. Yes, my dear Florindo, this is your home. Stay, I beseech you. Don't do me the wrong of believing you are the cause of inconvenience. You see, I am totally at ease in your presence.

FLORINDO. I can see that. Yes, I know that very well; but bear with me, I must leave.

LELIO. I am at a loss for words.

BEATRICE. (*To Lelio*). You must coax the reason out of him.

LELIO. My dear friend, what is the reason for your sudden departure?

FLORINDO. My uncle is very ill, and I wish to see him again before he dies.

LELIO. I completely sympathise with you.

BEATRICE. Oh, you see it's a lie! He told me his uncle wrote asking him to return to Venice, and now he says that his uncle is dying.

FLORINDO. I must have said the letter was about my uncle and that it beckoned me back.

BEATRICE. Do not change the facts.

FLORINDO. It is as I say, I can assure you.

BEATRICE. Show us the letter, and we'll see if it is true.

FLORINDO. Signor Lelio believes me without seeing the letter, without my having to

bring evidence.

BEATRICE. Don't you see, he is a liar? Don't you see? He wants to leave because he has become bored with our company.

LELIO. (*To Florindo*). Can it be possible that our friendship bores you?

FLORINDO. Dear friend, you wrong me by speaking so.

BEATRICE. Signor Florindo, before leaving, I hope you'll at least let me speak to you in private.

FLORINDO. Do you need to ask me a favour?

BEATRICE. Yes, I wish to ask you about some business in Venice.

FLORINDO. I shall no doubt comply with your wishes before I leave.

BEATRICE. (*Aside*). If I can speak to him again in private, he may well surrender to my fervent love. He will not be able to say no. (*She leaves*).

SCENE VI

Florindo and Lelio.

FLORINDO. Dear signor Lelio, as I was saying, it is necessary for me to leave. It would be a sign of true friendship, if you allowed me to leave without further ado.

LELIO. I'm at a loss for words. Go, if you so please. But I wish to ask you a favour first.

FLORINDO. I'm at your complete disposal.

LELIO. Please wait until tomorrow before leaving.

FLORINDO. I can't refuse your request. However, it would be far better if you allowed me to leave now.

LELIO. No, please wait until tomorrow. I need your presence here today.

FLORINDO. I cannot refuse you anything. What can I do for you?

LELIO. You know that I shall soon marry signora Rosaura.

FLORINDO. (*Aside*). Ah! I do know, unfortunately.

LELIO. You know how poverty-stricken my family is. I hope to make amends with Rosaura's dowry. But, of course, apart from that, I like her because she is young, beautiful and charming.

FLORINDO. (*Aside*). He'll be the death of me!

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Note to the Sparkling Books edition

La Psychologie des foules was first published in 1895 and translated anonymously into English, possibly by a group of students. A revised French edition, edited by Félix Alcan, was published in 1905 as *Psychologie des foules* by Ancienne Librairie Germer Baillière & Cie. We have corrected some grammar errors and anomalies in the original translation by reference to the Alcan edition. We have shortened a few passages but maintained the original footnotes with some additional footnotes of our own. We have also used the full title *Psychology of Crowds* rather than the abbreviation *The Crowd* used in earlier editions.

The Editors.

Dedication

To TH. RIBOT

Director of Revue philosophique

Professor of Psychology at the Collège de France

With my great respects.

Foreword by the author

The following work is devoted to an account of the characteristics of crowds.

The whole of the common characteristics with which heredity endows the individuals of a race constitute the genius of the race. When, however, a certain number of these individuals are gathered together in a crowd, for purposes of action, observation proves that, from the mere fact of their being assembled, certain new psychological characteristics result. These characteristics are added to the racial characteristics and, at times, differ from them to a very considerable degree.

Organised crowds have always played an important part in the life of peoples, but this has never been so true as at present. The substitution of the unconscious action of crowds for the conscious activity of individuals is one of the principal characteristics of the present age.

I have endeavoured to examine the difficult problem presented by crowds in a purely scientific manner - that is, by making an effort to proceed with method, and without being influenced by opinions, theories and doctrines. This, I believe, is the only way to arrive at the discovery of some few particles of truth, especially when dealing, as is the case here, with a question that is the subject of impassioned controversy. A man of science concerned with verifying a phenomenon is not called upon to trouble himself with the interests his verifications may hurt. In a recent publication an eminent thinker, M. Goblet d'Alviela, made the remark that, belonging to none of the contemporary schools, I am occasionally found in opposition to many of the conclusions of all of them. I hope this new work will merit a similar observation. To belong to a school is necessarily to espouse its prejudices and preconceived opinions.

Still I should explain to readers why they will find me drawing conclusions from my investigations which might be thought, at first sight, do not ring true. Why, for instance, after noting the extreme mental inferiority of crowds, elected assemblies included, I still affirm it would be dangerous to meddle with their organisation, notwithstanding this inferiority.

The reason is, that the most attentive observation of the facts of history has invariably demonstrated to me that social organisms, being every bit as complicated as those of all beings, should not be forced to undergo a sudden far-reaching transformation.

Nature has recourse at times to radical measures, but never after our fashion, which explains how it is that nothing is more fatal to a people than the mania for great reforms, however excellent these reforms may appear theoretically. They would only be useful were it possible to change instantaneously the genius of nations. This power, however, is only possessed by time.

People are ruled by ideas, sentiments, and customs - matters which are the essence of ourselves. Institutions and laws are the outward manifestation of our character: the expression of its needs. Given its outcome, institutions and laws cannot change this character. The study of social phenomena cannot be separated from that of the peoples among whom they have come into existence.

From the philosophical point of view, these phenomena may have an absolute value; in practice they have only a relative value. It is necessary, in consequence, when studying a social phenomenon, to consider it successively under two very different aspects. It will then be seen that the teachings of pure logic are very often contrary to those of practical reason. There are scarcely any data, even physical, to which this distinction is not applicable. From the point of view of absolute truth, a cube or a circle are invariable geometrical figures rigorously defined by certain formulae. From the point of view of the impression they make on our eye, these geometrical figures may assume very varied shapes. By perspective the cube may be transformed into a pyramid or a square, the circle into an ellipse or a straight line. Moreover, the consideration of these fictitious shapes is far more important than that of the real shapes, for it is they, and they alone, that we see and that can be reproduced by photography or in pictures. In certain cases, there is more truth in the unreal than in the real.

To present objects with their exact geometrical forms would be to distort nature and render it unrecognisable. If we imagine a world whose inhabitants could only copy or photograph objects, but were unable to touch them, it would be very difficult for such persons to attain to an exact idea of their form. Moreover, the knowledge of this form, accessible only to a small number of learned people, would present a very minor interest.

Philosophers who study social phenomena should bear in mind that, side by side with their theoretical value, these phenomena possess a practical value and that this latter,

so far as the evolution of civilisation is concerned, is alone of importance. The recognition of this fact should render very circumspect with regard to the conclusions that logic would seem at first to enforce upon them.

There are other motives that dictate to philosophers a like reserve. The complexity of social facts is such, that it is impossible to grasp them as a whole and to foresee the effects of their reciprocal influence. It seems, too, that at times behind visible facts, thousands of invisible causes are hidden. Visible social phenomena appear to be the result of an immense, unconscious working, that as a rule is beyond the reach of our analysis. Perceptible phenomena may be compared to waves, which are the expression on the surface of deep-lying disturbances in an ocean of which we know nothing. So far as the majority of their acts are considered, crowds display a singularly inferior mentality; yet there are other acts in which they appear to be guided by those mysterious forces which the ancients described as destiny, nature, or providence, which we call voices from beyond the grave, and whose power it is impossible to overlook, although we ignore their essence. It would seem, at times, as if there were latent forces in the inner being of nations which serve to guide them. What, for instance, can be more complicated, more logical, more marvellous than a language?

Yet, where can this admirably organised production have arisen from, except as the outcome of the unconscious genius of crowds? The most learned academics, the most esteemed grammarians can do no more than note down the laws that govern languages; they would be utterly incapable of creating them. Even with respect to the ideas of great people, are we certain that they are exclusively the creation of their brains? No doubt such ideas are always created by solitary minds, but is it not the genius of crowds that has furnished the thousands of grains of dust forming the soil in which they have sprung up?

Crowds, doubtless, are always unconscious, but this very unconsciousness is perhaps one of the secrets of their strength. In the natural world, beings exclusively governed by instinct, accomplish acts whose marvellous complexity astounds us. Reason is an attribute of humanity of too recent date and still too imperfect to reveal to us the laws of the unconscious, and still more to take its place. The part played by the unconscious in all our acts is immense, and that played by reason very small. The unconscious acts like a force still unknown.

If we wish, then, to remain within the narrow but safe limits within which science can attain to knowledge, and not to wander in the domain of vague conjecture and vain hypothesis, all we must do is simply to take note of such phenomena as are accessible to us, and confine ourselves to their consideration. Every conclusion drawn from our observation is, as a rule, premature, for behind the phenomena which we see clearly are other phenomena that we see indistinctly, and perhaps behind these latter, yet others which we do not see at all.

INTRODUCTION: THE ERA OF CROWDS

The evolution of the present age.

The great changes in civilisation are the consequence of changes in national thought.

Modern belief in the power of crowds.

It transforms the traditional policy of the European states.

How the rise of the popular classes comes about, and the manner in which they exercise their power.

The necessary consequences of the power of crowds.

Crowds unable to play a part other than a destructive one.

The dissolution of worn-out civilisations is the work of crowds.

General ignorance of the psychology of crowds.

Importance of the study of crowds for legislators and statesmen.

The great upheavals which precede changes of civilisations such as the fall of the Roman Empire and the foundation of the Arabian Empire, seem at first sight determined more especially by political transformations, foreign invasion, or the overthrow of dynasties. But a more attentive study of these events shows that behind their apparent causes, the real cause is generally seen to be a profound modification in the ideas of the peoples. The true historical upheavals are not those which astonish

us by their grandeur and violence. The only important changes from which the renewal of civilisations results affect ideas, concepts, and beliefs. The memorable events of history are the visible effects of the invisible changes of human thought.

The reason these great events are so rare is that there is nothing so stable in a race as the inherited groundwork of its thoughts. The present epoch is one of these critical moments in which the thought of humankind is undergoing a process of transformation.

Two fundamental factors are at the base of this transformation. The first is the destruction of those religious, political, and social beliefs in which all the elements of our civilisation are rooted. The second is the creation of entirely new conditions of existence and thought as the result of modern scientific and industrial discoveries.

The ideas of the past, although half destroyed, are still very powerful, and the ideas which will replace them are still in the process of formation. The modern age represents a period of transition and anarchy. It is not easy to say as yet what will one day evolve from this necessarily somewhat chaotic period. On what fundamental ideas will the societies which succeed our own be built on? At present, we do not know. Still, it is already clear that on whatever lines the societies of the future are organised, they will have to confront a new power, that of the last surviving sovereign force of modern times: the power of crowds. On the ruins of so many ideas formerly considered beyond discussion, and today decayed or decaying, of so many sources of authority that successive revolutions have destroyed, this power, which alone has arisen in their stead, seems soon destined to absorb the others. While all our ancient beliefs are tottering and disappearing, while the old pillars of society are giving way one by one, the power of crowds is the only force that nothing menaces, and of which the prestige is continually on the increase.

The age we are about to enter will in truth be the era of crowds.

Scarcely a century ago the traditional policy of European states and the rivalries of sovereigns were the principal factors that shaped events. The opinion of the masses scarcely counted and, most frequently indeed, did not count at all. Today it is the old traditions of politics, and the individual tendencies and rivalries of rulers which do not count; while, on the contrary, the voice of the masses has become preponderant.

It is this voice that dictates their conduct to rulers, whose endeavour is to take note of its utterances. The destinies of nations are elaborated at present in the heart of the masses, and no longer in the councils of princes. The entry of the popular classes into political life - that is to say, in reality, their progressive transformation into governing classes - is one of the most striking characteristics of our age of transition. The introduction of universal suffrage, which exercised for a long time but of little influence, is not, as might be thought, the distinguishing feature of this transference of political power.

The progressive growth of the power of the masses took place at first by the propagation of certain ideas, which have slowly implanted themselves in people's minds, and afterwards by the gradual association of individuals determined to bring about the realisation of theoretical concepts. It is by association that crowds have come to procure ideas, with respect to their interests, which are very clearly defined, if not particularly just, and have thus gained strength. The masses are founding syndicates before which the authorities capitulate one after the other; they are also founding labour unions, which in spite of all economic laws tend to regulate the conditions of labour and wages. They return to assemblies in which the Government is vested, with representatives utterly lacking initiative and independence, and reduced almost always to nothing other than the mouthpieces of the committees that have chosen them.

Today the claims of the masses are becoming more and more sharply defined, and amount to nothing less than the determination of utterly destroying society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark back to that primitive communism which was the normal condition of all human groups before the dawn of civilisation. Limitations of the hours of labour, the nationalisation of mines, railways, factories, and the soil, the equal distribution of all products, the elimination of all the upper classes for the benefit of the popular classes, etc., such are these claims.

Little adapted to reasoning, crowds, on the contrary, are quick to act. As the result of their present organisation, their strength has become immense. The dogmas whose birth we are witnessing will soon have the force of the old dogmas; that is to say, the tyrannical and sovereign force of being above discussion. The divine right of the masses is about to replace the divine right of kings.

Writers who enjoy the favour of our middle classes, those who best represent their rather narrow ideas, their somewhat prescribed views, their rather superficial scepticism and, at times, their somewhat excessive egoism, display profound alarm at this new power which they see growing; and to combat the disorder in those people's minds they are addressing despairing appeals to those moral forces of the Church for which they formerly professed so much disdain. They talk to us of the bankruptcy of science, go back in penitence to Rome, and remind us of the teachings of revealed truth. These new converts forget that it is too late.

If they were true believers, they would not be concerned with the preoccupations which beset these recent adherents to religion. The masses repudiate today the gods which their critics repudiated yesterday and helped to destroy. There is no power, divine or human, that can oblige a stream to flow back to its source.

There has been no bankruptcy of science, and science has had no share in the present intellectual anarchy, nor in the making of the new power which is springing up in the midst of this anarchy. Science promised us truth, or at least a knowledge of such relations as our intelligence can seize: it never promised us peace or happiness. Sovereignly indifferent to our feelings, it is deaf to our lamentations. It is for us to endeavour to live with science since nothing can bring back the illusions it has destroyed.

Universal symptoms, visible in all nations, show us the rapid growth of the power of crowds, and do not admit of our supposing that it is destined to cease growing in the near future. Whatever fate it may reserve for us, we shall have to submit to it. All reasoning against it is a mere vain war of words. Certainly, it is possible that the advent to power of the masses marks one of the last stages of Western civilisation, a complete return to those periods of confused anarchy which seem always destined to precede the birth of every new society. But can this result be prevented?

Up to now these thoroughgoing destructions of a worn-out civilisation have constituted the most obvious task of the masses. It is not merely today that this can be traced.

History tells us that from the moment when the moral forces, on which a civilisation rests, have lost their strength, its final dissolution is brought about by those unconscious and brutal crowds known, justifiably enough, as barbarians. Civilisations

as yet have only been created and directed by a small intellectual aristocracy, never by crowds. Crowds are only powerful for destruction. Their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase. A civilisation involves fixed rules, discipline, a passing from the instinctive to the rational state, forethought for the future, and an elevated degree of culture - all of them conditions that crowds, left to themselves, have invariably shown are incapable of realising. In consequence of the purely destructive nature of their power, crowds act like those microbes which hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies. When the structure of a civilisation is rotten, it is always the masses that bring about its downfall. It is at such a juncture that their chief mission is plainly visible and that, for a while, the philosophy of numbers seems the only philosophy of history.

Is the same fate in store for our civilisation? There are grounds to fear that this is the case, but we are not as yet in a position to be certain of it.

However this may be, we are bound to resign ourselves to the reign of the masses, since want of foresight has in succession overthrown all the barriers that might have kept the crowd in check.

We have a very slight knowledge of these crowds which are beginning to be the object of so much discussion. Professional students of psychology, having lived far from them, have always ignored them, and when, as of late, they have turned their attention in this direction, it has only been to consider the crimes crowds are capable of committing. Without a doubt criminal crowds exist, but virtuous and heroic crowds, and crowds of many other kinds, are also to be met with. The crimes of crowds only constitute a particular phase of their psychology. The mental constitution of crowds is not to be learnt merely by a study of their crimes any more than that of individuals by a mere description of their vices.

However, in point of fact, all the world's masters, all the founders of religions or empires, the apostles of all beliefs, eminent politicians, and, in a more modest sphere, the mere chiefs of small groups of people have always been unconscious psychologists, possessed with an instinctive and often very sure knowledge of the character of crowds, and it is their accurate knowledge of this character that has enabled them to so easily establish their mastery. Napoleon had a marvellous insight into the psychology of the masses of the country over which he reigned but he, at

times, completely misunderstood the psychology of crowds belonging to other races; [1] and it is because he misunderstood it that he engaged in conflicts in Spain, and notably in Russia, in which his power received blows which were destined within a brief space of time to ruin it. A knowledge of the psychology of crowds is today the last resource of the politician who wishes, not to govern them, but, at any rate, not to be too much governed by them. The latter is becoming a very difficult matter indeed.

It is only by obtaining some sort of insight into the psychology of crowds that it can be understood how slight is the action upon them of laws and institutions, how powerless they are to hold any opinions other than those which are imposed upon them, and that it is not with rules based on theories of pure equity that they are to be led, but by seeking what produces an impression on them and what seduces them. For instance, should a legislator, wishing to impose a new tax, choose that which would be theoretically the most just? By no means. In practice, the most unjust option may be the best for the masses. At the same time, if it is the least obvious and, apparently, the least burdensome, it will be the most easily tolerated. It is for this reason that an indirect tax, however exorbitant it may be, will always be accepted by the crowd, because, being paid daily in fractions of a penny on objects of consumption, it will not interfere with the habits of the crowd and will pass unperceived. Replace it by a proportional tax on wages or income of any other kind, to be paid in a lump sum and, were this new imposition theoretically ten times less burdensome than the other, it would give rise to unanimous protest. This arises from the fact that a relatively high sum, which will appear immense, and will in consequence strike the imagination, has been substituted for the unperceived fractions of a farthing. The new tax would only appear light had it been saved farthing by farthing, but this economic method involves an amount of foresight of which the masses are incapable.

The preceding example is simple. Its appositeness will be easily perceived. It did not escape the attention of such a psychologist as Napoleon, but our modern legislators, ignorant as they are of the characteristics of crowds, are unable to appreciate it. Experience has not taught them as yet to a sufficient degree that people never shape their conduct upon the teaching of pure reason.

Many other practical applications might be made of the psychology of crowds. A knowledge of this science throws the most vivid light on a great number of historical and economic phenomena totally incomprehensible without it. I shall have occasion

to show that the reason why the most remarkable of modern historians, Taine, has at times so imperfectly understood the events of the great French Revolution is that it never occurred to him to study the genius of crowds. He took as his guide, in the study of this complicated period, the descriptive method resorted to by naturalists; but the moral forces are almost absent in the case of the phenomena which naturalists have to study. Yet it is precisely these forces that constitute the true mainsprings of history.

In consequence, merely looked at from its practical side, the study of the psychology of crowds deserved to be attempted. Were its interest that of resulting from pure curiosity alone, it would still merit attention. It is as interesting to decipher the motives of the actions of individuals as to determine the characteristics of a mineral or a plant. Our study of the genius of crowds can merely be a brief synthesis, a simple summary of our investigations. Nothing more must be demanded of it than a few suggestive views. Others will work the ground more thoroughly. Today, we only touch the surface of a still almost virgin soil. [2]

Please refer to the published book for footnotes

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Preview of Further Exploits of Sherlock Holmes by David Stuart Davies and Matthew Booth ISBN 9781907230615 (epub)

This extract consists of parts of two stories, one each by David Stuart Davies and Matthew Booth

The Reichenbach Secret by David Stuart Davies

‘Stand with me here on the terrace for it may be the last quiet talk we shall ever have.’ The words are those of my friend Sherlock Holmes. They were spoken to me on that fateful evening in August 1914 just after we had captured the German spy, Von Bork. You will find details of this adventure in *His Last Bow*, an account I penned myself but presented in the third person in order to achieve a more dramatic effect. As it turned out it was not the last occasion on which Holmes and I had a ‘quiet talk’. That occurred some two summers later.

I had heard little of Holmes since the capture of Von Bork and then, out of the blue, I received a note from a neighbour of his informing me of my friend’s failing health. Shocked at this news, I determined to travel down from London to his retirement cottage in Sussex to see him. I was aware that this was probably the last opportunity I would have to meet with my old friend – a last chance to say goodbye.

I wired ahead to ascertain whether my visit was possible and received an instant, impish response from Holmes: ‘Please come if convenient; if inconvenient, please come all the same.’ I travelled from London by train and hired a taxi cab from the local

station to take me to his cottage. The cab dropped me by a dusty lane, at the end of which I saw a whitewashed cottage almost perched on the cliffs, overlooking the sea.

I found Holmes sitting in his garden in the afternoon sun, gazing across the great blue expanse of the English Channel. He wore a pale linen suit and a sand-coloured Panama hat and for all the world looked like a retired colonial. His face, however, was pale and gaunt and those bright eyes, although still sharp and piercing, had sunk deeper into their sockets. He rose to greet me and I found his handshake as firm as ever.

‘My dear, dear Watson, by all that’s wonderful, you are a sight for sore eyes,’ he said warmly. ‘Still practising a little medicine, I see.’

‘Why, yes,’ I replied in some surprise.

He grinned and pulled up a garden chair for me to sit on. ‘Iodine stains on the fingers and the telltale shape of a thermometer case in your top pocket.’

I chuckled gently. ‘You can still surprise me with...’

‘...my little observations. I’m please to hear it.’ He leaned forward and rang a small bell on the table beside him. ‘I am sure that you would find a cup of tea refreshing after your long journey.’

In response to the bell, his housekeeper emerged from the cottage, took my overnight bag and set about arranging for the tea.

‘Martha is no longer with you?’ I asked when the lady had returned indoors.

‘Sadly, no. She has retired and returned to her native Scotland. ‘My old bones are not up to serving you any more, Mr Holmes.’” he mimicked the faint Scottish tones of our redoubtable landlady.

It was a wrench to us both to lose her. She has served me well and truly.’

‘Served us both.’

Holmes paused and gave me a thin smile. ‘Served us both,’ he said softly.

How strong are the memories of that afternoon: Holmes and I sitting in the bright sunshine, drinking our tea, the faint breeze off the sea, the hum of the bees and the

conversation. The conversation, which began with talk of the war but then drifted inevitably into discussions of our past cases. As is the way with old men, we relived our youth, talking of Milverton, John Clay, the Baskerville affair and countless other cases in which Sherlock Holmes and I joined together to counteract the forces of crime. Once again we were in our Baker Street rooms, hearing the distressed pleas of a desperate client or rattling through the streets in a hansom cab on our way to Paddington, Euston or King's Cross to catch an express which would bring us to some great house in the shires where there was another mystery to unravel.

I felt pangs of sadness when we discussed the Agra treasure business, a case which brought me my own greatest treasure, Mary, my beloved wife. At first, Holmes seemed unaware of my discomfort but, as he moved on to discuss another of our adventures, he narrowed his eyes, gave me a brief nod and patted my arm.

As we talked, I felt my heart grow light and the spirit of adventure rise within my weary bones. I marvelled at the realisation of what we had done and achieved. To think that I was the companion of the man who had turned detection into an exact science.

Suddenly my friend laughed out loud. 'The irony of it, Watson, the irony of it.'

'I'm sorry, I don't quite understand.'

'You remember how I used to rail at you about your overly romantic accounts of my cases that were published in the *Strand Magazine*?'

'Indeed I do.'

'Well, now I find my memory somewhat ... unreliable, so that I have had to purchase a whole bound set of the magazine in order that I can bring to mind all the details of those cases.'

'He burst out laughing and I joined him.

We sat conversing until the sun had almost set, sending warm, crimson fingers of twilight across the still, sparkling waters.

*

That evening we dined quietly. Holmes' new housekeeper, Mrs Towers, a local lady

who didn't live in, provided us with a simple but appetising meal and Holmes had dug out a very good bottle of Beaune from his modest cellar. The cottage was illuminated by oil lamps, electricity not yet being available in such an isolated spot. There was also a small fire lit in the dining room to ward off the chill of an English summer evening; the flames added to the soft amber glow of the chamber which, in essence, reflected my own inner glow. Here I was with the best and wisest friend I knew, chatting amiably about old times. For the moment I felt cocooned in this pleasantly primitive dwelling against the harsh realities of the terrible war which was being fought across the channel whose blue waters we had been gazing upon that afternoon.

Mrs Towers served us pudding, assured my friend that she would attend to the washing up in the morning and bid us both good night. By the time Holmes and I were tackling the brandy and coffee, we were in a very relaxed mood indeed.

Holmes lit his pipe and stared at me quite sternly for some moments. 'I think the time is right to confide in you a secret that I have held close to my chest for a long time – something I wished I could have told you many years ago. I tell you now, my dear Watson, so that I can ask your forgiveness.'

I looked at my companion in surprise. 'Surely, there can be nothing...'

He held up his hand to silence me. 'Pass judgement when I have finished.'

'Very well,' I said, somewhat sobered by Holmes' change in demeanour.

'You will remember with great clarity the Moriarty case.'

'Certainly.'

'The way his thugs sought to kill me and how he visited me in my Baker Street chambers to warn me off? How I fled to Switzerland and he followed me? How we fought on the brink of the Reichenbach Falls? How he fell to his death in the roaring torrent and I escaped? You remember all that?'

'As though it were yesterday.'

Holmes paused and swirled the brandy in his glass before taking a drink. 'I was fooled, Watson. We all were. I did not actually meet Professor Moriarty for the first time until a month after the Reichenbach incident.'

‘What! But you told me that he came to see you in London.’

Holmes shrugged. ‘I believed that he did. I was a gullible fool. Someone came to see me. He told me that he was Moriarty and he bore a close approximation to the description that I had been given of the scheming professor – a description which also turned out to be false. In truth, the man who came up the seventeen steps of 221B was an impostor hired by Moriarty. Had I my wits about me at the time, I should have realised that. The great man was not going to place his own person in such danger by visiting his arch-enemy in his lair. He could not know what I would or could have done. Moriarty did not take those kinds of risks, so he sent along a consummate actor to play him. The message was genuine: it was the messenger who was a fake.’

‘I cannot believe that you were taken in by this charade.’

Holmes shook his head sadly. ‘But I was, my friend. The phrase is ‘hook, line and sinker’, I believe. But the fellow played his part well. Even now my flesh begins to creep when I consider that encounter. The trick worked beautifully, as Moriarty knew it would. He had a powerful intellect and created his own certainties out of mere possibilities. One more brutish attack from his agents and I came to realise that my best plan was to leave the country until Scotland Yard moved in on the Professor’s organisation.’

Holmes smiled. ‘And what a pleasant time we had of it – until we reached Rosenlauri.’

‘But you were aware of the shadow cast over our sojourn.’

‘Yes. I tried to protect you from it, but I knew that your sensibilities would alert you to the danger we were in. It was I who arranged for the boy to bring you the message about the dying Englishwoman at our hotel. I knew your stout heart could not refuse such a patriotic summons.’

‘You wanted me out of the way.’

‘I wanted you out of danger. I believed I was about to face my nemesis by the Reichenbach Falls. I feared the worst. But what I didn’t know – what, as a detective, I failed to deduce – was that we were being trailed by trained assassins in the pay of Moriarty, under the leadership of Colonel Sebastian Moran. And not, as I assumed, by Professor James Moriarty himself.’

I took a gulp of brandy. My mind and my senses were now clear and alert. All feelings of drowsiness and inebriation had been expelled by my friend's narrative. Although these revelations were shocking and new, they only presented a fresh interpretation which was frighteningly plausible.

'Where was Moriarty?' I asked at length.

'That comes later. Suffice it so say that he too had left London for the safety of foreign shores. You see, he was far more concerned about preserving his own life and salvaging what he could of his organisation than dealing with an irritant like me.'

'More than an irritant, surely? It was your work which brought about the collapse of his empire.'

Holmes grinned broadly. 'You still have a way with words and the use of a telling phrase, Watson. You are correct, of course, but Moriarty was far too intellectual to lower his sights to personal revenge. I must be removed, there was no uncertainty about that, but for a long time it was not a personal vendetta. That would be too...'

'Emotional – and emotion clouds the intellect.'

'Yes. You see we were twins – of a kind.'

I leaned forward on the table and gazed at my friend for some moments before I spoke. 'Then who... who did you meet on the path above the Reichenbach Falls?'

For an instant, Holmes seemed to be overcome by a strange emotion. He closed his eyes and lowered his head. 'In truth,' he replied at length, 'I do not know. He was yet another agent of Moriarty. Not the same man who visited me in Baker Street but of similar appearance. At the time, I really believed that this was the Professor Moriarty, the Napoleon of Crime, but he was not. However, I soon discovered that this fine fellow was skilled in martial arts. Never have I fought so hard and so desperately as I did on that precipitous ledge overlooking that yawning chasm. Our struggle was exactly as I reported it to you in your consulting rooms on my return to London three years later.'

'With your knowledge of baritsu you managed to overbalance him and he fell over...'

'That terrible abyss,' he mouthed my own words back at me.

I did not smile.

‘You see why I found it hard to tell the truth.’

‘But these are lies upon lies. You kept me in the dark for three years – three whole years – believing you to be dead and now you are telling me that you never met Moriarty at all and did not bring about his death.’

‘I am not saying that. The truth is always darker and more complex than we would have it.’

‘Is it?’ I replied tersely, reaching for the brandy bottle and pouring myself another drink.

‘The account I gave you of my escape was true. After my opponent had dropped into the swirling waters below me, I knew I could not retreat down the path without leaving tracks. My only resort was to attempt to scale the cliff wall behind me. I struggled upwards and at last I reached a ledge several feet deep and covered with green moss where I could lie unseen. I felt I had reached the end of my dramatic adventures for that day when an unexpected occurrence showed me that there were further surprises in store for me. A huge rock, falling from above, boomed past me, struck the path and bounded over the chasm. For an instant, I thought it was an accident; but a moment later, looking up I saw a man’s head silhouetted against the darkening sky; and another stone struck the ledge within a foot of my head. The meaning was plain: another of Moriarty’s minions was on the scene. I had to act quickly unless I wished to remain an easy target. I scrambled back down on to the path. I don’t think I could have done it in cold blood. It was a hundred times more difficult than getting up. But I had no time to think of danger, for another stone sang past me as I hung my hands from the edge of the ledge. Half way down I slipped but, by the blessing of God, I landed, torn and bleeding, on the path. I took to my heels, did ten miles over the mountains in the darkness, and a week later I found myself in Florence, with the certainty that no one on the world knew what had become of me.’

‘This much I know.’

‘Then it is time I told you what you do not know.’

The Dragon of Lea Lane by Matthew Booth

I have remarked elsewhere that from the years 1894 to 1901, Mr Sherlock Holmes was a very busy man. During those years, he distinguished himself in a number of investigations which I have subsequently made public. By way of an example, the terrible death of Black Peter will no doubt recall itself to students of these demonstrations of my friend's peculiar talents. I also remain hopeful that I will gain approval in time to provide full details of the terrible affair of the Kensington Plague, the solution of which was given to Holmes by close examination of a dead man's handkerchief.

Another enquiry recalls itself to my mind, which was so remarkable in its details and displayed my companion's gifts so acutely, that I feel these chronicles would be incomplete without some record of it. I refer to the brutal murder of Lawton Fields, and the terrible truth surrounding the Dragon of Lea Lane.

It was in the latter part of the second week in October 1895, that we were sitting together at the breakfast table when our landlady brought in a telegram. Holmes tore it open, perused it, before tossing it to one side. He rose from his chair and paced up and down the sitting room, although it was evident from his expression that the contents intrigued him. He rang for the landlady, scribbled a response to the telegram, and ordered her to dispatch it at once. As she closed the door behind her, he turned swiftly to me.

'Cast your discerning eye over that, friend Watson,' said he, pointing to the telegram. 'When you have done so, get your hat and coat and meet me downstairs.'

Such curt instructions were not uncommon from him when the possibility of a problem presented itself to him, and he had walked briskly from the room before I had even had the opportunity to digest the contents of the telegram. It was itself a terse communication from our old comrade, Inspector Lestrade, and ran as follows.

'TERRIBLE BUSINESS AT WHYTEDALE, LARGE VILLA IN NORWOOD. MURDER. PROMPT ASSISTANCE REQUIRED. MUCH IN YOUR LINE. SEND REPLY, WILL MEET AT LOCAL STATION. LESTRADE.'

Within a quarter of an hour, I was seated beside my companion in a hansom, rattling through the early morning streets towards our destination. The sun had yet to rise, and the lamps were still lit, giving a dull orange tint to the grey buildings which lined the London thoroughfares. Early risers and working men were making their way through the darkened streets to wherever their day was to take them. For ourselves, we had no notion of the business upon which Lestrade had engaged us. Holmes, with his usual reticence, refused to speculate upon the purpose of our journey. We were fortunate in catching a train promptly, and were in Norwood in an acceptable time. At the station, we had no difficulty in recognising the small, alert bulldog of a man, who hurried forward to greet us warmly. He shook Holmes' hand with reverence.

'It is good of you to come, Mr Holmes. I apologize for the brevity of my telegram.'

'It was rather short on detail, Lestrade.'

'I thought it best to tell you the full facts as we drive to the house. It is only a fifteen minute journey.'

He had hired a dog cart, and we climbed into it, leaning back in the seats, while Lestrade sat opposite us, checking off the points of his tale on the figures of his left hand.

'Whytedale is a large villa situated on Lea Lane, a little under a mile from here. It is owned by Mr John Carlton, whose name may be familiar to you as one of the most respected art historians of recent years.'

'His name has not escaped my notice,' said Holmes. 'His analyses of the works of Caravaggio, though eccentric, were not devoid of some interest.'

'I wouldn't know too much about that, Mr Holmes, I must confess. What I do know is that Mr Carlton lives in the villa with his wife, Victoria, and a small number of domestic staff, including the maid, a girl by the name of Sarah Harte.'

'Mr Carlton is writing a learned book on the influence of art in modern culture and society, and in order to assist him, he employed a man called Lawton Fields, fresh from the university, who seemed eager to develop a relationship with his famous employer. His duties were varied, but consisted of mainly of researching references

and illustrations, and taking dictation when necessary. His references were excellent, and for the last six months, the two men have worked closely together. It all came to an end at about ten o'clock last night, however, when the maid, tidying away after dinner, heard a terrible shriek from the hallway. This is a long, narrow passageway leading from the front door and stretching the length of the house. A stairway extends from the centre of it, and on either side of it there are doors leading to various rooms including the dining room, the study, and the drawing room. Do I make myself clear?'

'Perfectly so.'

'Mrs Carlton had retired to the drawing room, and her husband was reading some proofs in the study. On hearing the scream, Sarah, the maid, ran from the dining room into the hallway, and found Lawton Fields lying on his back, his body convulsing violently. Seconds later the master and mistress came into the hallway, disturbed also by the cry. Fields gripped Sarah with such force that she was unable to move, and was much distressed, as you can imagine.'

'The man spoke to her?'

'Just so, Mr Holmes. She is prepared to swear to the words.'

'And they were?' prompted Holmes eagerly.

Lestrade shook his head, as though he himself did not believe the maid's story. 'She says he muttered, "The dragon – my God, the dragon."'

It seemed a fantastic revelation and I found myself sharing Lestrade's scepticism. I looked across at Holmes but his face was impassive.

'She is certain?' he asked.

'Positive. The proximity of her to his lips convinces her that there is no doubt as to the words themselves.'

'And this remarkable statement of a dragon was heard by Mr and Mrs Carlton?'

Lestrade shook his head. 'They heard nothing. The man whispered the words in to the maid's ear.'

'Quite so. Does she offer any explanation?'

‘No. There is an obvious explanation for them, however.’

Holmes gave a wave of his hand. ‘Speak plainly, Lestrade.’

The little official gave a sharp intake of breath and sighed heavily. ‘Mr Lawton Fields was stabbed in the chest, as I have told you. The weapon used, however, was an ornate silver letter opener, which belonged to John Carlton himself. It was kept in the study.’

‘I see no connection.’

The handle is delicately carved,’ continued Lestrade, ‘into the shape of a resplendent dragon.’

Our conversation had continued throughout the course of our journey, and by the time Lestrade had given us his final revelation, we found ourselves at the villa gates, where we alighted from the trap. Whytedale was a large modern villa of white brick, consisting of three storeys, each with latticed windows which peered out from sprawling ivy. It stood in its own grounds, set back from the road, and with the exception of the policeman standing at the wrought iron gates, betrayed no evidence of the violence which had been committed within it. We walked up a grassy pathway, lined with laurel bushes, and stopped at the large wood-panelled door. Holmes pointed to the door with his stick.

‘Was this door locked last night?’

‘Yes, Mr Holmes. Mrs Carlton herself did so.’

‘And you have left everything undisturbed for our inspection?’

‘I have touched nothing, although John Carlton is not too happy about his secretary lying in the hallway still, as you can imagine.’

Holmes gave a snort of derision. ‘Well, his inconvenience cannot hinder the course of justice. Some of these rich men must be taught that the world cannot always bend to their desires.’

Lestrade led us into the long hallway of which he had spoken. It was a lofty passageway, with wooden floors, and an impressive spiral staircase winding heavenward from the centre. The inspector had been as good as his word in leaving everything untouched, for the door to the study was ajar, and on the opposite side of

the hallway, two doors also stood open. These no doubt led to the drawing room and the dining room of which we had heard. The walls were lined with excellent portraits of cavaliers and noblemen from the previous century, as well as a particularly striking image of the crucifixion, all of which paid testament to the occupation of the owner of the house.

These details I noticed afterwards. For now, my attention was directed to the tragic figure which lay on its back in the centre of the passageway. It was the body of a man no more than thirty years of age, whose face had once been handsome, before a terrible death agony had twisted it beyond the recognition of those who had known him in life. He wore an evening suit, his starched shirt front stained crimson by his loss of life. One arm was stretched out to the left, and the other lay across his stomach. From the centre of his chest there protruded a magnificently carved letter opener, whose blade was thrust into the man's body to the ornate hilt. The design on the handle, cast in silver, was of the creature of legend known as a dragon, its head raised in almost noble fashion, and its huge wings coiled around its body.

'The dragon of Lea Lane,' I could not help but say.

'A remarkable instrument,' said Holmes, kneeling down beside the body and peering at the dragon through his lens.

'Its splendour is diminished by what it has been used for,' I remarked.

Holmes beckoned me closer to the body. 'Observe the depth to which the blade has been plunged. It took some force to do that. A man's doing, would you say?'

'A suitably enraged woman, if she were strong enough, might well be able to inflict a similar wound.'

Holmes rose to his full height, and placed his fingers to his lips. He shook his head like a man who is far from convinced, but was prevented from elucidating, for we heard footsteps coming from the great staircase which towered above us. I had no difficulty in recognising a man who is master of his own house. He was a tall, noble man, around forty, with the first glimpse of the blanching of the hair at his temples which shows a man's journey through life. His thick, dark moustache had delicately waxed tips, and a short Imperial beard gave his strong chin a jutting prominence of patrician determination. He wore a sombre black suit, with a claret coloured satin waistcoat

and corresponding cravat which enhanced the elegance of his ensemble. He looked from one to the other of us and after a moment's consideration approached my companion.

'You are Mr Sherlock Holmes? My name is John Carlton. My wife, Victoria.'

Mrs Carlton was a woman of equal nobility to her husband. Her face was proud, her features delicate, although the poise of her head gave some intimation of arrogance. She held her husband's arm, and when she gave a slight inclination of her head by way of greeting, I could not help but wonder at the grim determination behind her eyes that the tragedy which had occurred would not blight her reputation.

'I understand you are known for speed and discretion, Mr Holmes,' her husband was saying. 'I trust you will endeavour to employ both in this matter.'

Holmes adopted his brisk, business-like tone. 'I shall certainly do everything I can to assist a swift conclusion to this tragedy, Mr Carlton. It would help me to do so if I could clarify a number of points with you.'

Carlton gave a grunt of irritation. 'If you must, you must, but I have told the police everything I know.'

His wife released her arm from around his. 'For heaven's sake, John, have sense. The sooner we co-operate, the sooner this can be behind us.'

'This is our private sanctum, Victoria, damn it! How sordid it is to have something so unaesthetic as murder over our threshold.'

She turned to face my companion. 'Forgive my husband, Mr Holmes. Unless someone wishes to talk about art with him, or congratulate him upon his collection, he tends to have no interest in them.'

Sherlock Holmes smiled, although his eyes were fixed on the art historian. When he spoke, however, his manner was cordiality itself. 'I can appreciate dedication to one's pursuits. Mr Carlton, I wonder if you could give me an account of what happened last night.'

'Perhaps we can go to my study,' he said. 'Looking at that thing in front of me is hardly conducive to conversation.'

‘Certainly,’ replied Holmes. ‘Lestrade, I should like to speak to the maid. Perhaps you would be kind enough to fetch her? Thank you. Now, Mr Carlton, I am at your disposal.’

With a dismissive nod of his head, John Carlton led us across the hallway to the study. It was a small, cluttered room, lined with shelves of leather-bound volumes. There were display cases in the corners of the room, each one filled with artefacts and curios ranging from bronze sculptures to ancient drawings on parchment, the exhibits in Mr Carlton’s personal museum of art. A large desk stood in the centre of the room, with papers strewn across it, and various notes scribbled on bits of scrap paper. Behind the desk was a leather-backed chair in which Carlton now sat. There were other, small chairs in the room but he did not invite any of us to sit.

Mrs Carlton was the first to speak. ‘I must apologise for the disarray in this room but John forbids me to clean it. I tried this morning but he wouldn’t let me near the place.’

‘They are not interested in that, Victoria.’

THE SICILIAN WOMAN'S DAUGHTER: FOUR GENERATIONS OF MAFIA WOMEN

International crime with a twist

"If you loved *My Brilliant Friend*, *The Godfather*, and *Montalbano*, you'll love this utterly gripping novel about women in organised crime in Sicily."

Most victims of the mafia are the Sicilians themselves. The role of women both as perpetrators and victims has been grossly overlooked. Until now.

As the daughter of Sicilian immigrants, in her teens Maria turns her back on her origins and fully embraces the English way of life. Notwithstanding her troubled and humble childhood in London, and backed up by her intelligence, beauty and sheer determination, she triumphantly works her way up to join the upper middle-class of British society. There she becomes a bastion of civility.

But a minor incident wakes up feelings of revenge in her like those lurking in Maria's Sicilian origins. As she delves deeper into her mother's family history a murky past unravels, drawing Maria more and more into a mire of vendetta.

Reviews

"An extraordinary and inherently riveting read"

An extraordinary and inherently riveting read from beginning to end, *The Sicilian Woman's Daughter* is an original and deftly crafted novel showcasing the genuine flair for narrative storytelling by author Linda Lo Scuro (a pen name)...highly recommended for community library Contemporary General Fiction collections

Midwest Book Review

"A brilliant, thrilling read about real life grit."

The plot, in a nutshell: Mary/Maria has a pleasant life with a loving husband and children, from whom she has kept secret her mother's side of her family, who are Sicilian mafia. They are thrust into her life and she becomes involved in some terrible situations, drawn further and further into dangerous territory that puts everyone she loves at risk.

The things I loved about it: Mary's identity is formed from drastically different parts of her life, leaving her feeling as though she fits nowhere. It's not hard to feel that way, in this day and age, and makes for a lot of sympathy towards her character. The plot is fast, and makes for a gripping read. Though the tension grows rapidly throughout, the writing is witty and there are moments that are laugh out loud funny. Though life is extremely tough for them, there are an endless amount of strong women in the novel, with our protagonist having a horrendous start in life. A brilliant, thrilling read about real life grit...

The author: Linda Lo Scuro is a pseudonym, due to the sensitive nature of the story. I am so intrigued by mysteriously secret identities!

I rate this: 5 stars.

Worst hobby in the history of hobbies... 'big-time serial tarting'

Sara Wingfield, UK

"It's a must-read for mystery lovers."

From the get-go (catchy title), *The Sicilian Woman's Daughter* delivers an exciting multi-generational story. I enjoy reading fast-paced novels steeped in cultural drama. This one fulfils my love for mysteries and intrigue.

Linda Lo Scuro weaves the story about the daughter of Sicilian immigrants with layer upon layer of substance. Soak up the history and ride the turbulent waves of discovery as Maria learns about herself and the roles of women in the Sicilian families.

The novel *The Sicilian Woman's Daughter* shows what it's like to wake-up to your heritage and integrate that knowledge into your present life. It's a must-read for mystery lovers.

Carolyn Bowen, USA

"Ms. Lo Scuro does a fantastic job filling in the sordid past of Maria's family and blending it in with the present day characters."

"I loved this book. The transformation of Maria was remarkable to read. Ms. Lo Scuro does a fantastic job filling in the sordid past of Maria's family and blending it in with

the present day characters. Will visiting her Sicilian family turn this upper-middle class Brit into the person she has always feared she may become? Perhaps it was inevitable.

“Linda Lo Scuro is as mysterious as Maria. Because this was the first book I’ve read by this author, I Googled her name to find out more about her. What I found out about Linda Lo Scuro is exactly what she wants us to know. This is not her real name and she will not be giving interviews. You can follow her on social media under her pseudonym, but her real persona will not be revealed. I admire her decision as well as her determination to stay anonymous amid the clamor of writing a truly remarkable and memorable novel. I think she is as interesting as her novel, which makes this a double win in my reading world.”

Writeknit Reviews, USA

“The charm of reading this book is that: always, and I mean always, the reader is satisfied with the result.”

“Maria, the protagonist of *The Sicilian Woman’s Daughter*, is a retired, respectable teacher. Happy wife, mother of two daughters and Benjamin’s granny. Life is gorgeous in her West London residence (or not?), by the Thames, and lovely Maria has all the time in the world to read books, drink tea, enjoy the time with her beloved husband Humps (or not?), or do whatever she wants to do, all the day long. Or not?

“Zia, the other main character, an influential, fragile looking, old woman, and Maria’s aunt, will turn her niece’s way of life upside down. Despite appearances, Zia is made of iron. La famiglia before anything else is her motto, and she proves it along with the action of the book.

“Suddenly Maria’s easy life turns into a fast stream, and she hardly manages to keep the direction. Her values and beliefs are washed away and she has to face fear and anger.

“Written in the first person *The Sicilian Woman’s Daughter* immerses the reader deeply and actively and it blows away the benefit of the doubt for the perpetrators, because justice, in Mafia terms, is a matter of feelings, guts and immediate reaction. The charm of reading this book is that: always, and I mean always, the reader is

satisfied with the result. A gun under the bed will make the owner more confident and his/her self-esteem 1000x higher. Just saying!

"The Sicilian Woman's Daughter is a confrontation between raw, unpolished power (men) and the sophistication of women's minds. Guess who will win in the end!"

Manuela Iordache, Romania

"Abused, scheming, vindictive, connected, murderous, victims and victors."

"Vaffanculo... I love the word as much as I love this book. Talk about attitude! Sicilian women are a surprising bunch according to Linda Lo Scuro's book 'The Sicilian Woman's Daughter'. Abused, scheming, vindictive, connected, murderous, victims and victors.

"I loved discovering the story of Maria aka Mary who came from a poor Sicilian background to recreate herself in England as a successful and wealthy teacher and wife to a high flier bank executive.

"She has just retired and with more time on her hands, she is encouraged to visit her Aunt Zia who lives in London also. Well, this little old lady is a complex web of hidden secrets and dodgy dealings. I don't want to tell here the extent of her power within the Sicilian underworld but quite a few people are dead because of her scheming combined with her contacts. She is held in high regard and this goes along way in getting what you want in Sicily.

"Maria goes for a family trip to Sicily and is further drawn into the shady world of mafia happenings....much to her dismay and attempts to stay removed from her past. Her morals and all she has created for herself/of herself are under threat.

"I was fascinated by this story and can completely understand the fascination Linda Lo Scuro has also. The excitement of danger is enthralling."

Andrea Brown, New Zealand

"A cracking good read"

"This is a cracking good read and it brings to life the Sicilian family that Mary/Maria

has tried to forget for over 30 years. Mary is married to Humphrey, a banker with two delightful daughters and a grandson. They live in an upmarket apartment and she has just retired from teaching in a series of prodigious schools. Despite her seemingly Englishness as the tale unfolds we learn of her connections to a family of women who are definitely Mafia and of her dreadful childhood of abuse and neglect. She has carefully created her place in society through her looks and intelligence making sure that her Sicilian family stays out of her life, that is until she reconnects with Zia her mother's sister and through helping her she begins to expose dreadfully deeds that have occurred and are still occurring due to the women in her family. Her life is then torn apart by realising that she is just the same as her Sicilian family and she needs them to help her when the life of her immediate family is at risk.. A story that will bring alive the heat and the underbelly of life in a Mafia controlled Sicilian village."

Ann Gough, UK

"This is an addictive read from page one to last and thoroughly enjoyable!"

"I have always considered women to be the 'power behind the throne' (I apologize to all those Queens like Her Majesty and her husband who has to walk BEHIND her) and this book proves it to be true. It was fascinating to read about how different her lives were depending on where she was or WHO she was that day.

"This is an addictive read from page one to last and thoroughly enjoyable! Great book!"

Janet Cousineau, Canada

"An enthralling read on many levels."

"An interesting and thought provoking read this one. Mary also known as Maria has two identities - an Italian one and a British one. She now lives in London but returns to the place known as The Village, in Sicily to unpack the mysteries of her past.

"She's living a troubled life, not feeling part of the world she's now in - She's known not by her name by many but as 'the Sicilian woman's daughter' and this separation of identities and anonymity is crushing to read about.

"Maria tells her story of her Sicily and the image the world has of that place - its mafia

connections and how she and everyone from there is tarred with the same brush. As the story takes us on that (very fascinating) train journey across to the island, secrets start to float to the surface, as do the bodies from the depths of the water no doubt.

“A fascinating look at the mafia stain on a family of women and what they have to do to survive, bring justice and not be a victim. There are four generations of women’s stories to immerse yourself in and this is a real treat, never too much nor too long. Sicilian words pepper the text as they would the pasta.

“An enthralling read on many levels.”

Book Trail, UK

“Certainly exciting and riveting reading.”

“Living in London Maria (Mary) has sought to escape her Sicilian roots keeping her family history away from her English husband and her children. However a cup of tea with her Sicilian aunt results in her being drawn back to her roots, and the mafia connections.

“Maria tells her story, her memories of her mother, the visits to Sicily and family there. An enthralling glimpse into another world where grandmothers keep a gun close to hand, and it pays to be very respectful to others - who knows what mafia connections they may have. Maria has recently retired, is enjoying life in West London, and uses some of her free time to visit her aunt. In so doing she is drawn into Sicilian plots and intrigues, ranging from making a man love a woman to dealing with a violent husband. Eventually Maria takes her family to visit Sicily, and becomes embroiled in revenge and justice mafia style. Certainly exciting and riveting reading.

“The book has a list of characters and Sicilian/Italian words at the front, which I found a little daunting, but in fact I only referred to them on a couple of occasions. Although the book covers 4 generations of Maria’s family, it is very clearly written and I was never confused as to who was who. The Sicilian/Italian words used are done so in context, blend in well, and are mostly explained in the main text.

“It was a fast moving book, included plenty of surprises, and gave an insight into different way of life and family ties. The book has left me wondering how much of it is

based on the reality of life in some of the regions of this island. Thought provoking!"

Emma B Books, Austria

"Insightful, well written and I found the pace just right"

"As I read this book I felt I was reading a true account of how ordinary lives can be turned upside down by family connections we try to remove ourselves (in this case the Mafia). Insightful, well written and I found the pace just right. The storyline took an interesting twist at the end which didn't disappoint."

Dawn D'auvin, UK

"Wow – this is a great story!..."

"...We start with Maria (Mary) presently in the UK, who feels that she is caught between two cultures – Sicilian and British – although she hasn't been back home to her Sicilian village for over four decades. Having migrated to London as a child she now reads The Times, the Economist and the Financial Times. She has also joined the UK Conservative Party, and occasionally imitates BBC newsreaders to get a posh accent after graduating in English. She met and married Humps, an investment banker, and had two children with him. There are, however, Mafia links within Maria's family...

"The writing is superb throughout and I see Linda Lo Scuro progressing to great success."

Phil Rowan, UK

"I enjoyed it very much!"

"The story was pleasing and easy to follow. When I started the book I read all the characters and thought I would lose a lot trying to keep everyone together to get to the end of the book, not so. It was written in just such a way that it was easy to follow all the players.

"Maria grew up in England and Sicily with a mother who was very mean to her. Her mother would hit and beat her.

“Peppina was the reason that Maria was forced into an arranged marriage. She also hit and kicked Maria so badly that Maria lost a kidney. Maria never told anyone about this but kept it bottled up inside her.

“The story tells of all the things that the mafia had done in Sicily and brought over to London when another of Maria’s aunts moved there. Her name was Zia! She at least helped Maria to get through her life!

“The story was very interesting and very easy to follow. I would recommend it to all my family and friends.”

Mary Weimer, USA

“I really enjoyed the book.”

“When I saw the list of characters at the front I thought I would never be able to remember the names or follow. But once I got into it, it was brilliant. I loved the Sicilian translations.”

Pamela Lewis, UK

“A thoroughly enjoyable read.”

“An exciting plot, great characterisation and an unexpected ending all add up to a thoroughly enjoyable read.”

Millie Thom, UK

“OUTSTANDING.”

“OUTSTANDING. This book makes very interesting reading and a lot of research has gone into it. I also like Linda’s writing style, and the plot flowed. I have awarded this book 5 deserving stars.”

Haley Norton, UK

“Female sophistication and guns, poison, and network connections do the trick”

“Family ties can be strong. The Sicilian Woman’s Daughter shows how four generations of mafia women both protect and destroy. Maria, the protagonist, is a

daughter of Sicilian immigrants to the British society. Where Maria herself seems to prefer settling in the UK and marries a local, her mother and grandma still pull. Illustrated in very Italian English, pull. Returning to The Village on Sicily is accompanied by three funerals and no wedding in sight. Women acting as perpetrators and victims of domestic violence, brutal murders, money laundering, alcohol and drug abuse, and adultery.

"No matter how many rosaries you say, how faithful you are, there are always excuses to take revenge if that suits you well. Female sophistication and guns, poison, and network connections do the trick. The plot's convincing and rich in local flavors."

Henk-Jan van der Klis, Netherlands

"This book is full of cultural drama"

"A very interesting and thought provoking book. This book is full of cultural drama, which I really enjoyed.

"This book is about a woman who has been living with two identities. One as Mary who lives in London with her English family and the other as an Italian, a life that she has been trying to keep secret from her English family for over 30 years. (Don't want to give any more away)

"The book is well written and flows consistently through to the end. This makes the book easy to read. It is written in the first person which makes you feel as if it's a true account of Mary/Maria's experiences rather than the story being fictional. While reading this book you can tell that Linda Lo Scuro has researched the topics covered in the book thoroughly.

"I really liked how Linda has given a list of characters at the beginning of the book. When I first saw the list I thought, how am I going to remember all these characters, but as I started reading I didn't have any trouble. Also, at the beginning there is a list of Sicilian /Italian words and definitions. I thought this was a great idea, also now I know a few basic words in Sicilian/Italian.

"An interesting ending as I wasn't expecting it to end the way it did.

"Definitely worth reading."

“This is a book that deserves a thorough read...”

“Firstly, I wanted to get my hands on this because of the research. The Sicilian mafia, the Italian roots of someone who’s grown up in London. Bam! Perfect match.

“But then the story starts flowing and is easy to follow and you find yourself carrying a lot more than you’d expected.

“I mean what do I know about what it feels to grow up surrounded by the mafia?

“Actually...

“While teaching English in Rome, I had a few students with stories that blew my mind. So, of course, seeing this synopsis I plunged right in. I can’t say how genuine it is, but it sure reads well. Like a truly good book. Not like your typical commercial thriller about what most people assume is mafia from the movies.

“That was exactly what I wanted. And that’s exactly what I got.

“I would love to read other works by Linda Lo Scuro.”

Julie Parks, UK

“This was definitely a satisfying read from start to finish!”

“I really enjoyed Linda Lo Scuro style of writing it was like peeking into Maria’s diary sometimes others it felt as intimate as having a conversation with Maria about her life. What an interesting life!

“Lo Scuro has Maria take you on a wonderful journey from London to Sicily & back... She finds her way out and begins her new life having her own a family and career, detaching herself from her family in Sicily and her roots. But just like they said in the Godfather ‘Just when I thought I was out they pull me back in.’

“I love how Lo Scuro wrote from multiple women’s perspectives about revenge, the way she built up the layers of multiple characters was quite fun to read. She even

managed a couple of plot twists that I didn't see coming in the storyline.

"I will warn you when reading this book visits to Zia's house will make you hungry for some good Italian home cooking & baking. Best to read this book with a side of good cannoli to snack on!

"I am looking forward to reading more by Lo Scuro she writes very interesting strong female characters in this book. This was definitely a satisfying read from start to finish!"

Marianne Peluso, USA

"The book grabbed me and I couldn't put it down!"

"I went into this book without knowing anything about it and I was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed this book. The book grabbed me and I couldn't put it down!

Robin Ruiz, USA

"Thought provoking"

Very intriguing good read. Mary or Maria, as she has double identities, is a great heroine. Thought provoking."

Aggie Barnes, USA

"The book drew me in from the first page until the last. Thanks for the advanced copy :-). I'll definitely be looking out for more to come from this author!"

Tara Jill, USA

"I started reading this book without knowing what to expect and I was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed this book.

"This book is about a woman who has been living with two identities. On one hand she is Mary who lives in London with her English family, on the other she is Maria the daughter of Sicilian immigrants who come to England and it's a side to life that she

has been trying to keep secret from her English family for over 30 years but becoming hard to hide from the past.

“The book is well written and flows consistently through to the end it is written in first person which makes you feel as if it’s a true account of Mary/Maria’s experiences rather than the story being fictional. Well done to the author on producing an excellent read.”

S Ballinger, UK

“A highly accomplished debut novel”

“Refreshingly original, emotive and with a number of unique facets to the story, this is a highly accomplished debut novel. I particularly liked the fact that the line between fact and fiction was beautifully blurred with the two sides rubbing along seamlessly. It has you questioning throughout whether a particular event actually did occur in real-life or whether it’s a figment of the author’s imagination. Either way, it makes for a very interesting read. Written under a pen name, and having released very few biographical details about herself, Lo Scuro has said that when writing *The Sicilian Woman’s Daughter* that she wished to remain detached from the link her family have had to the mafia which could’ve led to upset and repercussions within her family circle. I guess this also answers the question of why her profile picture on Twitter is only an avatar/cartoon. This for me makes the book even more interesting and intriguing than it already was!

“You can tell that the author knows what she is talking about regarding the mafioso women in this story and the impact this had on their lives, everything about it feels authentic. It is sad but also obvious to me that this secrecy regarding the author’s name is essential, but spare a thought for her because, as she has mentioned in interviews, if the book is successful there would be no glory for her due to the anonymity - so this has both negative and positive aspects to it. She continues by saying that she would not have written it had she needed to disclose her identity, so a big shout out to the publisher for allowing this. A fascinating book, immediately engaging and thought-provoking from first page to last, with an intriguing backstory, Highly recommended.”

“A real treat”

“We’ve seen the mafia movies and been fascinated by them, but now, fans of the genre are in for a real treat: seeing this world through the eyes of its women. The protagonist, Mary, is complex. She’s engaging and likeable, but underneath the layers lurks a troubled upbringing. She’s Sicilian and living in England now with her adoring and charming husband. Readers will love him.

“The present and the past intermingle to draw readers into a world painted brilliantly with sensory details. We discover Mary and have the pleasure of hearing about a fascinating group of colorful characters. The cultural details draw a more complete picture and create understanding. But we also are reminded that there are more sides to the cultural story, of course.

“Mary has a good life with her professional husband, but when she visits her aunt Zia, she gets drawn into helping her help others...but not in the typical way. Mary ends up seemingly out of her comfort zone running interference for Zia, but while performing certain actions, Mary draws deeply of her Sicilian heritage and then remembers where her family came from and what they were capable of. She does help others, but at times, this includes teaching people lessons. Readers wonder, will Mary cross a certain line eventually? Will things escalate and change this good woman into something else?

“There are the stereotypical violent men in this book who bully women. But do the women have a voice? Is there anything they can do? Scuro’s female characters use their strength and their power and show a side to the whole mafia picture that isn’t often shown. The women do surprising things, making for gripping story.

“There is a quote in the book by the female lead that sums up the struggle: “*[The abuse]...when you’re an adult, it leaves you with a painful black hole inside; and you’re forever trying not to go to that dark center, moving around the perimeters and trying not to get swallowed up by it*”.

“Mary ends up doing things one wouldn’t have thought her capable of. Does this change the way a reader will view her? At any rate, Mary brings up profound ideas

such as what anyone is capable of given exposure to the right people and circumstances. There are surprises in this book and lots of food for thought. It is a worthwhile read."

Long and Short Reviews

"An engrossing novel"

"The Sicilian Woman's Daughter is an engrossing novel with menace accompanying every character, as we weave through a precarious story of lives entwined with the Mafia. There is a simmering threat and unrelenting revelation about abuse and violence, that clings to a people steeped in the DNA of the Sicilian Mafia. "You no know a thing. In England accident happen, in Sicily accident organised."

"Mary (Maria) left Sicily as a young girl with her mother and father, returning only on short trips until she started University. Her early life was marred by physical abuse from her mother and her aunt Peppina, leaving her permanently physically damaged. Today Mary is a wealthy, refined, Englishwoman, happily married to Humps (Humphrey), with 2 daughters and a Grandson, and she has recently retired from teaching. The only connection Mary retained with her Sicilian background was with her facetious cousin Susi, at a similar age and as close as sisters. One day Mary gets a call from Susi asking her to meet with her mother, Zia (Mary's other aunt). Zia was kind to Maria growing up and had immigrated to England shortly after Mary's family, however, Mary hasn't seen her aunt Zia since those early days, and she gives in to the request to meet. One quick meeting and she can go back to her normal life. Yeah Right! When they meet Zia pleads: "Yes, you come back tomorrow. You keep promise for Zia. I have friend. She have problem, she need you help."

"We're catapulted into this community, and through no fault of our own, we take the consequences. We try to figure out how to confront the dark side of life from childhood and through our teens when we don't have the instruments to deal with it. And when you're an adult, it leaves you with a painful black hole inside; and you're forever trying not to go to that dark centre, moving around the perimeters and trying not to get swallowed up by it."

"Linda Lo Scuro does a remarkable job of portraying the 'nature vs nurture' dilemma that Mary faces and while she is a cultured English woman when we first meet her,

she knows her wider family circle live amongst a relentless, unforgiving and ruthless culture. How much of that 'nature' element will come to the fore when she agrees to return to Sicily with her own family, to resolve a wider family matter? While the writing is excellent, the incidents described, the tension built, and the character interactions, all have a feel of authenticity.

"Through the first half of the novel it lacked a bit of pace, but when Mary and her family decide to go to Sicily the pace picks up and the plot is darkly entertaining. I really like the characterisation of Mary, as she has this deeper, calculated and revengeful side that has been hidden, even from her own family. No-one is to be taken for granted in this novel and surprises are sprung at unlikely times keeping the reader fascinated until the end."

Peter Donnelly, The Reading Desk

"A very good story and one that I am sure some people can relate to. Mary (Marie) is the focus of the story and after being retired for some time she has decided to spend some time with an Aunt of hers. They live in England having emigrated from Sicily and Marie really only has this Aunt left as a family having married an English banker. While being around her Aunt she is noticing that her Aunt is like some of the older women of the village that she grew up in. The Aunt speaks a lot of what happens in the family stays in the family, what is said in the family stays in the family. For me, this was the way I was raised coming from an Italian and the family from Southern Italy so a lot of what happens in this story reminds me of some of my relatives, male and female. The story really takes off when the family takes a trip back to Sicily and to the village where she grew up. I found this to be a very good read that once I started I wanted to finish and the story grabs you all the way to the end. There are enough twists and turns even in the family to make any story interesting. The characters are all good and the storyline is easy to follow. For me, this was a very good book."

Pat Lorelli, Reviewer, USA

"Awesome book!."

"I wanted to read this because of the research. The Sicilian mafia, the Italian roots of someone who's grown up in London. Awesome.

"The story starts flowing and is easy to follow and you find yourself thinking more

than you'd expected.

"I mean what do I know about what it feels to grow up surrounded by the mafia. Not like your typical commercial thriller about what most people assume is mafia from the movies."

Amiee Teal, Reviewer, USA

"The Michael Corleone quote from Godfather III "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in" sums up this book perfectly. An interesting read highlighting how different cultures are, or are they?

"Sometimes it's the person you think you know best you actually know least."

Ann Jones, Reviewer, UK

"The Sicilian Woman's Daughter by Linda Lo Scuro is a very gripping book with a well-written plot and a beautiful cast of strong characters. This book was a very quick read and had a lot more to offer to its reader than one can imagine. This book is very culturally rich and it was great to get a detailed glimpse into the family of mobs and also witnessing the repercussions of belonging to such a family.

"I enjoyed reading this book from start to end, mainly because the writing was good and had a very easy flow to it. The plot-progression was good and so was the pacing and tension and they all complimented and went along the story very well.

"I'd recommend this book to all crime and suspense readers who enjoy reading culturally rich books."

Heena Rathore Pardeshi, Editor, Writer and Reviewer, The Reading Bud, USA

"I enjoyed this book about a woman coming to terms with her heritage and its place in her world today. I found the story to be compelling and well written. I will definitely recommend this book to others."

Mary Nickell, Reviewer, USA

"A thoroughly good read with very interesting characters, particularly the female ones, which gives an excellent insight to the current state of the mafia at ground level

in Sicily. It is hard to credit that the mafia still operates in local communities there and can still make people 'disappear' if considered necessary.

"In particular the development of the lead character from a fairly normal middle class English woman to a murderess was dealt with such that the transition seemed almost inevitable and acceptable despite being a surprise.

"The movement of the main characters between England and Sicily added an interesting dimension to the novel which rendered it not only exciting and relatively fast moving but also very informative."

Allan Blackley, Educator, UK

"An intriguing story of how you can try to escape your family roots, but sometimes those ties are too strong. The author introduces us to independent women tied together through brutality, heritage, blood and secrets.

"A really interesting read."

Sarah Burton, Reviewer, UK

A great book which I felt was as true an account as you will get about how the Mafia can affect everyone who is involved with them even if they do not want to be. Lives have a very different meaning and whilst family connections are strong they can't escape it even if they want to.

"I would thoroughly recommend it."

Terry Burgin, Reviewer, UK

"I enjoyed reading this book immensely. Even though it's fiction it gave you an insight into what might happen in this sort of family. Plus, you learn great words in Sicilian!"

Doris Vandruff

"This was an interesting book...many will truly enjoy this read."

Rebecca Hill, USA

Prologue

Rumour had it that Ziuza, my grandmother's sister, on my mother's side, carried a gun in her apron pocket – both at home and when she went out. She wore her apron back-to-front, resulting in the pocket being propped up against her belly. She kept her right hand poised there, between her dress and apron as if she had bellyache. I had noticed this suspicious behaviour when on holiday in Sicily with my family when I was twelve. At that stage, never could I have imagined that she was concealing a gun, while she stood there in my grandmother's kitchen watching me have breakfast. I never saw her sitting down. She brought us thick fresh milk, containing a cow's hair or two, in the early mornings and often stayed to chat.

She had a dog, Rocco, white and brown, which she tied to a wooden stake in my grandmother's stable downstairs. It was a lively animal, snapping at whoever passed it, jumping and yapping. The mules, the rightful inhabitants of the stable, were out in the campagna with my grandfather from the break of dawn each day.

A tight silver bun stood proudly on Ziuza's head. Her frowning face always deadly serious. Fierce, even. An overly tanned and wrinkled face. Skin as thick as cows' hide. Contrastingly, her eyes were of the sharpest blue – squinting as she stared, as if viewing me through thick fog. I was scared of her. Truly scared. And all the other women were frightened, too. You could tell by the way they spoke to her, gently and smiling. Careful not to upset her, always agreeing with her opinions. They toadied up to her well and proper. An inch away from grovelling.

And, I found out the rumours about the gun were true. Ziuza would come and bake bread and cakes at my grandmother's house because of the enormous stone oven in the garden. I helped carry wood to keep the flames alive. Did my bit. One day the sisters made some Sicilian cakes called cuddureddi, meaning 'little ropes'. They rolled the dough with their bare hands, into thick round lengths in the semblance of snakes. Using a sharp knife, they then sliced the snake-shape in half, longways, spread the lower half of the butchered snake with home-made fig jam. They put the snake together again, slashed it into chunks. Then the chunks were dealt with one-by-one and manipulated into little-ropes by pinching them forcefully into shape with their

nimble fingers.

As Ziuzza bent over to wipe her mouth on the corner of her pinafore, I caught a glimpse of her gun. I was sitting at the table sprinkling the first trayful of cuddureddi with sugar. No doubt about it. It was there in Ziuzza's big inside pocket of her pinafore. While I was looking at the bulge, she caught me out. We exchanged glances, then our eyes locked. She narrowed her hooded eyelids into slits and crunched up her face. I blinked a few times, then looked around for some more wood to replenish the oven, grabbed a few logs and vanished into the garden.

After she received a sickening threat and Rocco's bloodied paws were posted to her in a box, she, like her dog, came to a violent end. Ziuzza was shot in her back, in broad daylight, by someone riding by on a Vespa. People with line of sight, from their windows to the body, hurried to close their shutters. Nobody saw who it was. Nobody heard the gunshots, though the road was a main artery from one end of The Village to the other. And nobody called a doctor. It would be taking sides. Which you certainly didn't want to do. Added to that was the fact that Ziuzza at that moment was on the losing side. She was left to bleed to death in the road like an animal. It wasn't until the dustcart came round that they removed her body because it couldn't get by. But nobody commented, it was as if they were removing a big piece of rubbish. It was nothing to them. But instead of throwing it away, they took the body to her home. Nobody was in. So they brought it to my grandmother's house instead.

This was the lowest point in our family's history. With time, though, Ziuzza managed to triumph through her son, Old Cushi, who began the escalation. And, later, her grandson, Young Cushi, completed it by becoming the undisputed boss of our village, of the region, and beyond. But the transition was not easy. A bloody feud ensued. Lives were lost on both sides. Some might know who Ziuzza's enemies were. I didn't get an inkling. Most of the information I came across was from listening to what the grown-ups in our family were saying. And they never mentioned her rivals by name. Some faceless entity fighting for control of the area.

This is just one of the episodes I remember from our holidays in Sicily. There are many more. Every three years, I went to Sicily with my parents. Those I remember were when I was nine, twelve, fifteen and eighteen. The last time we went my mother was ill and we travelled by plane. All the other times we travelled by train because poverty

accompanied us wherever we went. I think we had some kind of subsidy from the Italian Consulate in the UK for the train fare. It was a three-day-two-night expedition. I remember setting out from Victoria Station carrying three days' supply of food and wine with us. Especially stuck in my mind was the food: lasagne, roast chicken, cheese, loaves of bread. We'd have plates, cutlery, glasses, and an assortment of towels with us. At every transfer all this baggage had to be carried on to the next stage. No wheels on cases in those days. Then we'd get the ferry from Dover to Calais, and so began the first long stretch through France, Switzerland, until we finally pulled into Milan Station. Where our connection to Sicily was after a seven-hour wait.

We used to sleep on the waiting-room benches, though it was daytime, until someone complained about the space we were taking up. The Italian northerners had a great disdain for southern Italians. They saw us as muck, rolled their eyes at us, insulted us openly calling us "terroni", meaning "those who haven't evolved from the soil." Even though I was young, I noticed it, and felt like a second category being – a child of a minor god. There was the civilised world and then there was us. My parents didn't answer back. And it was probably the time when I came closest to feeling sorry for them. For us.

The journey all the way down to the tip of Italy – the toe of the boot – was excruciating. The heat in the train unbearable. When there was water in the stinking toilets, we gave ourselves a cursory wipe with flannels. Sometimes we used water in bottles. Every time we stopped at a station, my father would ask people on the platforms to fill our bottles. Then came the crossing of the Strait of Messina. At Villa San Giovanni, the train was broken into fragments of three coaches and loaded into the dark belly of the ferry. My mother wouldn't leave the train for fear of thieves taking our miserable belongings, until the ferry left mainland Italy. While my father and I went up on the deck to take in the view. But we had orders to go back down to the train as soon as the ferry left. Then I'd go up again with my mother. She became emotional when Sicily was well in sight. She would become ecstatic. Talk to any passengers who'd listen to her. Some totally ignored her. She'd wave to people on passing ferries. Laughing and, surprisingly, being nice to me.

Reassembled together again, the train would crawl at a tortoise's pace along the Sicilian one-track countryside railway, under the sweltering heat. Even peasants who were travelling within Sicily moved compartment when they got a whiff of us.

Another event that excited my mother was when the train stopped at a level crossing. A man got out of his van, brought a crate of lemons to our train and started selling them to the passengers hanging out of the windows. My mother bought a big bag full and gave me one to suck saying it would quench my thirst. Another man came along selling white straw handbags with fringes, and she bought me one.

By the time we reached The Village our bags of food stank to high heaven and so did we.

PART I

London, 2017

ONE

Sunday 20th August

It all begins quite innocently enough.

“I just got an email from our landlord asking us to remove our bikes from the garage,” Humps says, as we are having dinner. He’s in his stay-at-home clothes today – a Tattersall shirt worn loose over his jeans and rolled up at the sleeves, frayed at the collar from countless washes. I still find him attractive, even in his rumpled look and with his receding salt-and-pepper hair.

“Why?” I ask.

“Apparently, someone pointed out, at the Annual General Meeting, that our bikes are taking up precious space, have cobwebs on them, and that we hardly use them.”

“Look, darling, you know they’re snobs here. They just don’t want our old bikes next to their latest generation, shiny contraptions.”

We have lived in the Riverside View Residence in West London for four years. I’ve never felt comfortable here with the attitudes against foreigners of some of our neighbours. That irked me. But the proximity to the Thames with a spacious balcony within a stone’s throw of the river, where I can sit sipping tea and reading, helps me overlook their behaviour towards me, especially when Humps is not around.

“What are we going to do?” I say to my husband, “You do realise that there’ll be

friction, if we don't comply, don't you? Shall we remove them?"

"Never!", he says firmly, over his salmon en croûte. "Mary, as you know, mine is a memento of my Oxford University days. I've had that bike for over forty years, and there's no way I'm getting rid of it – it stays where it is! What's more our sky-high rent gives us the right to keep as many bikes as we want in that bike-store. One resident has six!"

So Humphrey said 'no.' Emphatically.

"Well, I'm getting rid of mine because it's so old," I say. "There's a charity, I've heard, that does up old bikes and sends them out to Africa. They can have mine, and I don't think Clara will want hers now she's moved to central London. She should have taken her bike with her, anyway."

"Even if we get rid of your two bikes, it won't free up any space because all three are leaning next to each other against the wall," Humps says.

"Well, I'm giving mine to the charity. Make a child happy. I'll phone Clara and ask what she wants to do with hers."

I had my left kidney taken out when I was young due to a violent kicking. My doctor suggested that I give up cycling in traffic so as not to endanger my other kidney. No motorbikes or skiing either. "Look after it," he said, "if I damage one of my kidneys it wouldn't be as serious, but for you it's a different kettle of fish..." I only cycled in parks and on towpaths after that.

I phone our daughter in the evening, ask if I can give hers away. "Yes," she says, "no way do I want to cycle in London traffic, I'd rather take the tube. Less hassle. Anyway, it'd only get pinched." There have been some nasty accidents involving buses and lorries lately, cyclists have been killed in their prime. It is a relief to me that she wants to do away with hers, too. She tells me a little about her job. How her boss at the interior design studio exploits her, charging excruciating prices to clients and giving her a miserly salary. She reckons she's the flair behind the studio's success.

Right, I have to grab the bull by its horns, or the bicycles by their handlebars, and sort this out. Humps is busy with his high-powered job as a senior banker managing the bank's own account investments. He still also manages a few important clients'

portfolios. I have more time. I've worked part-time since we got married, then I gave up work altogether when we moved to Riverside – we don't need the money. I taught English. Whether to kids in comprehensives, smart public schools, or adult education. It feels as if, over the years, I have taught the whole of London and her husband. I have given enough, and it is time to think about myself.

The next day, I phone the charity. "Yes," says the bright young voice on the other end of the line. "We've got a man and van. We can send him round to collect the bikes, if you want."

"That would be great."

Down I go to the bike-store. Our bikes are a sorry sight – huddled together in the corner against the white wall. I need to clean up the two bikes before handing them over. Separate the three, brush away the cobwebs, and give them good soapy water and sponge treatment. I remove the black saddlebag from mine. A keepsake. Cycling back home after shopping with my saddlebag full and, at times, a carrier bag on each handlebar, down the Thames towpath has been one of the pleasures in my life. Riding under the green canopy with sunlight filtering through it. Or the gentle drizzle falling on me rewarded by a hot cup of tea and cake when I got home. Proud not to be polluting the air and getting exercise at the same time. I can always buy a new bike.

Anyway, one bike is staying, two are going. End of story.

Not so.

TWO

Monday 21st August

My cousin Susi phones me out of the blue. Susi is the only relative I've kept in touch with, and that is only every now and then. When some major incident takes place in her life – whether good or bad – she contacts me. Her mother is my mother's sister. When Susi's parents emigrated to London from Sicily, they lived with us until they could afford a deposit on a house. This meant that she slept in the single bedroom with me, in a single bed. So, essentially, we are like sisters in that we spent a lot of time together as children. Then her family bought a house across the road from ours. So we could still play together. But, they moved again. This time quite a long way out,

to another part of London. I missed Susi so much after that. I also missed Susi's mum, she was kind to me. Eventually, Susi and I developed different characters and, as a consequence, we now don't have much in common except for the strong affection that binds us.

"Hi, Mary!"

"Susi, how are you?"

"Pete and me have just broken up."

"How many times has that happened now?"

"This is the third and final time."

"You know you'll take him back."

"No, I won't, not this time. I've had enough."

Pete has been spicing up his boring married life by having an on-and-off affair with Susi. She doesn't see that. I've told her as much, many times before.

"How's work?" I ask.

"Shit environment," she says. "Things are not good, some people have been laid off and there's this threat of redundancy hanging over us."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I do hope you'll be alright. Anyway, Susi, you're so enterprising, I'm sure you'll soon find something else even if it came to the worst."

"Mary, my mum's been asking about you. She says she really wants to see you. You know how close she was to your mum. My mum's fond of you as well. Try to make an old woman happy, why don't you?"

"Well... I'll think about it, Susi." She was emotionally blackmailing me. The call was probably instigated by Zia, Susi's mother.

"How's your retirement going, then? Enjoying being a lady of leisure, are you?"

"I am, actually. It's nice to have all that time on my hands," I say, "there're so many things I want to do and books to read."

"Yeah, but if you want a tip from me, don't get bogged down with all that reading. Try getting out of the house. Why don't you try volunteer work?" Susi says.

"Could do. Yes, I've always felt passionate about defending battered women and mistreated kids. It's got to have something to do with our childhood, you know?"

"Yeah, tell me about it," she says.

"We weren't dealt the best cards in life, were we?"

"You can say that again. I've got an even better idea. Why don't you get yourself a lover? That'll pep your life up."

"Really, Susi. I'm still in love with my Humps."

"Yeah, but it must be all pretty routine in the sex department by now. You need variety. The spice of life," she says. She wasn't altogether wrong in that respect.

"Maybe," I joke. We laugh. She knows it'll never happen. "Susi. I need to go out now. I'll phone you some time soon, promise."

"Right, but you promise you'll go and see my mum. Please, Mary."

"OK, Susi, I promise. Bye for now."

And I keep promises.

Wandering round a cycle shop, I am looking for ideas about how to vamp up Humps's bike. But, every bit of it needs changing, and then it wouldn't be his bike any more. So I end up buying a snazzy silver and black cover. You'd think there is a Harley-Davidson standing under that. To my surprise, when I go back to the bike-store I notice, on the wall, someone has drawn a big hand giving Humps's bike the finger. And, under it, they have written: "ARSEHOLE." It must have been the person who asked our landlord to tell us to remove the bikes. Who is that? No idea.

If we'd been owners of the flat we live in, we would have known exactly what is going on. We decided not to buy the flat. Instead, we bought a lovely chocolate-box cottage near the sea in Dorset, and a chalet in Cortina d'Ampezzo. When Humps finally decides to retire, we can go and spend our days by the seaside or in the Italian

Dolomites. Both of which we love.

While cooking I keep churning the incident round in my mind. How dare someone call Humps an arsehole? No respect. I always taught my students the importance of respect. Respect for their parents, teachers, classmates and for the elderly. At the end of one school day, I once left school with some girls, and asked them to show respect to two old ladies by letting them get on the bus before us, even though they had arrived after us. I am so respectful that I even show respect to those I don't respect at all.

I need to find out who it is. And when I find out, what will I do? Will it be an eye-for-an-eye? Forgiveness? 'For they know not what they do'? Can revenge appease anger? Or, does it make matters worse? I have always found forgiving difficult. No doubt, revenge is time-consuming, requires effort, planning, and guts. And I chafe against the Catholic Church for forgiving sinners so easily. Just kneel down, tell the priest your sins, get a gentle rebuke, a few Hail Mary's, and off you go.

Now, I have a feeling deep in the pit of my stomach, a ball of anger which won't go away. Is this what my Sicilian ancestors felt when they couldn't get justice? Shamefully exploited by land barons. Powerless, helpless victims. Whole families, including children, working all day for a pittance, bending down low to the land under the blazing sun. Not even being able to feed themselves properly. Families living in one room, without electricity or running water. Revolting against their masters who were colluding with the State. And there is no sense of State when you have an empty stomach. In those conditions the only resort for justice was to take it into your own hands. Let's not leave it for heaven to sort out. Let's get it seen to down here. That was the attitude most Sicilian land workers developed.

The Romans captured Sicily and made it their own. Created a system called latifondo, a feudal system, whereby peasants rented land from the owners, or from a sub-lessor. That system survived well into the 1950s. The mafia emerged from the latifondo. The landowner's men paid thugs to keep the peasants from revolting; to punish those workers who dared to complain. But workers also sought to rise above their station and either co-operated with their very exploiters, or organised groups among themselves to threaten their own. Thus they could acquire a better piece of land or demand a percentage from their fellow-peasants. A savage survival of the fittest ensued post World War II. Rome couldn't cope, or didn't want to cope, with Sicily any

more. The island went its own way.

When they grew up, hordes of those peasant children, amongst them my mother and father, emigrated, taking with them the pitiful image of their long-suffering parents. And they also took with them their sense of the violent climate they had grown up in.

My father arrived in England with a broken pair of shoes and a big cardboard box tied up with rope. Without a word of English. When he had saved enough money for the wedding, and train tickets for them to come back, he went to Sicily and married my mother. I still have a couple of black and white photos of their wedding. She is wearing her best Sunday dress. They couldn't afford a wedding dress. And their wedding reception was in the courtyard of my grand-parents' house.

THREE

Tuesday 22nd August

Susi's mother, Zia, had been another one of those peasant children. Zia means 'aunt' in Italian. But in Sicily it is used as a term of respect for older women, as is zio for older men. Also, Susi's mother is a 'donna d'onore.' That is 'a woman of honour,' which implies that she is to be handled with utmost care because she has mafia links. So 'Zia' is the least you can call her. But, as coincidence has it, she is also my real aunt. And, although she is less than transparent, I am fond of her. I've kept her at arms' length to protect Humps, but he is now nearing the end of his career, so I need not fear an entanglement as much as I did before.

Seems like a lifetime since I saw her. Years. She is eighty-seven and lives on the other side of London from us, the East End. To get there, I walk about a mile down the Thames towpath, along the edge of a football field, and up a main road to the nearest underground station. I could take the bus but I'd rather get the exercise. Then, forty minutes by train with a change. It isn't exactly next-door. But the distance isn't the reason for not going to see Zia, it is an excuse.

My mother died young, when I was still at university. For five years, during my mother's illness, Zia had helped look after her and was often round at our house. The two sisters were very close, always had been. They have another sister in Sicily called Peppina. I did what I could to help during those years, but, emotionally, I was all at sea. Trying to deal with my teenage issues as well. Because I am an only child, I couldn't

share the burden. My father stayed away from home for as much as possible. I never saw them exchange gestures of affection. No conniving glances. Even worse, at times they fought each other, never mind that I was present. My mother would growl at him like she did at me, and I remember objects and even furniture flying in our living room. When her illness became serious, he moved into the spare single bedroom, and started thinking about a new wife. A dark brooding atmosphere had always hung inside our house.

As if it hadn't been black enough, it became blacker when her incurable disease was found. Zia kept my mother company and livened the place up a little. I didn't know the full force of the illness, the gravity of it. Until I accompanied my mother to the doctor one day. I had to translate what the doctor was saying to her. He wanted her to have a complicated operation. She was scared and refused point blank. Sitting opposite the doctor, and with my mother at my side, he dropped a bombshell that I wasn't, even remotely, expecting: "If she has the operation she could live for another four to five years, if she doesn't it'll be six months." I was gob-smacked. It was as if a ton of bricks had come down on me. I felt deeply sorry for her.

On the tenth ring, Zia answers the phone with a forceful "Hallo!" Zia doesn't talk, she shouts, as my mother used to do.

"Zia, it's Maria, your niece."

"Maria, I no believe you call me. Long time no hear. Why you no call?"

"Sorry, Zia, I've had a busy life, what with the house, work, family..."

"You make excuse. You no make time for you Zia."

"But I'm calling you now," I say. "I've got a grandson, you know? His name's Benjamin."

"I know. Susi she tell me. Ah, you daughter give baby nice name?"

"Zia, he's the most gorgeous baby you could ever hope to see. Anyway, Zia, I wanted to check you were at home this afternoon."

"Cousin here, but you come. You remember Angelina and Provvidenza, yeah?"

Zia doesn't do plurals. Like many native Italian speakers of English, she finds an 's' at the end of a word difficult to pronounce.

"Yes, I remember, I think."

Actually, they aren't our cousins at all, not even ten times removed. But Zia likes to collect cousins. So any Sicilian she's been on particularly good terms with is awarded the status of an honorary cousin.

"Angelina?" she shouts even louder, irritated that it took me a moment to retrieve the women from my memory. "She has daughter, Provvi. You know, she have bad leg, she limp."

"Oh, yes!" I say. "I know."

I sincerely hope that Angelina and Provvi are in another room and the doors are closed, so that they haven't heard what she just said.

"See you later, Zia."

That's what Zia is like. If she has to describe anyone, she distinguishes them by their physical faults: the one with the crooked teeth, hawk nose, squint, big mole, shrill voice...

Though, of course, Zia herself has never been an oil painting, nor is she ugly. One might describe her as nondescript, quite short and thin. She wears flat sensible shoes, pleated skirts and blouses. I've never seen her in trousers. Her movements fast, darting around all over the place. And she throws her arms about a lot. Walking with Zia was exhausting, as a child I had to run to keep up. She has acquired a hunched back. It makes her head stick out at the front. It isn't parallel with the rest of her body. Her hair is always clipped back by a large tortoiseshell slide. Overall, she has an odd schoolgirl style. Her appearance is deceptive, though, because there's nothing, absolutely nothing, naïve about Zia.

I swing our Residence's heavy gate shut behind me and step onto the towpath. Strolling along the Thames always makes me feel good, that fresh light breeze in my face and in the trees, the clouds floating by... But today, I am more absorbed in my

thoughts. Going to see Zia after all these years has brought back memories of my family as a child. I'd heard that Zia had been involved in things not quite above board in her past. I don't know what exactly. I couldn't ask and, even if I did, she wouldn't tell me.

My earliest memory of my extended family in Sicily was when I was there as a nine-year-old when we stayed with my grandparents and Aunt Peppina. Zia and her family were in Sicily, too. Though Zia's family stayed with her in-laws in the same village, within walking distance, as there wasn't space enough for all of us at my grandparents' house. Zia and Susi spent most of their day with us, though. Susi and I were very close and we loved playing together. Our grandfather didn't like us. I vaguely remember him. A severe man. He never spoke to me, or to Susi, come to that – only to Silvio and Stefano, Susi's brothers, out of his grandchildren. He had a deep revulsion for females. Susi and I were playing in the courtyard with other girls in the neighbourhood. My memories are those of hearing the sound of the hooves against the cobble stones, then looking up to see him arriving sitting proudly on his mule. You could even describe him as arrogant. Getting off, he landed lightly on the ground causing some dust to lift. Then he spat not far from his boots, led the mule to the stable, and yanked the reins hard, on the sharp corner, to turn the mule round, and force it in. At that moment, my grandmother came down to the courtyard all in a tizz, like she did every time he arrived home. He didn't acknowledge her, so much was his disdain of the sight of her.

The mistreatment was due to the fact that she hadn't been capable of giving him a son. I remember he insulted her in front of visitors and threatened to hit her by raising his hand into a slap position. Once I overheard some women saying that when my grandmother and grandfather were out in the village together, they bumped into the mayor and stopped to talk to him. My grandfather slapped my grandmother in the face, while she was standing there silently, just to prove he was boss in his house. A real man.

Our grandmother signalled to Susi and me to go back inside the house. So we followed them upstairs. He sat on a chair in the kitchen, lifted one of his feet for my grandmother to pull off his boot. She tugged so hard that she jolted backwards as the boot came off. Then the other boot. After which she took the boots out to the garden where she gave them a wash and brush up.

It was also during this holiday that Ziuzza's husband died in the unforgiving campagna. It was summer. Not understanding what was going on, all I could do was to listen to the shrills and shouts in my grandmother's house. She sat down and slid her hands into her hair, rocking backwards and forwards in the chair, in a kind of distressing trance, yelling and repeating in Sicilian dialect "Ammazzru me cugnatu, disgraziati. Ammazzru u marito di me sorru!" *meaning*: "They've killed my brother-in-law, the villains. They've killed my sister's husband." I was frightened and couldn't understand what was going on. She knew that Ziuzza would be left vulnerable, without a husband, and on the wrong side of victory. And Ziuzza had always been defiant. Her enemies knew she wouldn't back down, that she had been the driving force behind her husband. And that she was more than capable of taking the helm.

Ziuzza's husband's body was brought to my grandmother's house because it was bigger. Ziuzza's house had a narrow spiral staircase up to the first floor and there was no way they could bring a coffin down, if not vertically. Like my grandmother's house, Ziuzza's house had a stable on the ground-floor. It would have been disrespectful to hold the wake there.

I can still remember the day when they brought his body back to The Village – it's impressed on my memory. I've forgotten a lot about my childhood, but I will never forget this episode. Ziuzza needed support when the body arrived in The Village, so my grandmother and other women were there to comfort her. Ziuzza had two sons. They had both emigrated to England and could not console her. So she was accompanied by a couple of men, while others went before them and cleared the roads by telling people to go inside. With a sheet over her head, she walked to my grandmother's house through, what was at that point, a ghost village. Even the two little grocery shops and the chemist pulled down their shutters. Only stray cats and dogs roamed the streets.

My grandfather and two other men, all on mules, went to fetch the body. They knew exactly where his land was. A man whose land was next to his had noticed that his sheep had strayed. That meant they weren't being herded. He went to inquire and found Ziuzza's husband lying perfectly immobile face down where his blood had coagulated with the dust. Flies hummed around him and feasted on his injuries. The peasant rushed to The Village to raise the alarm.

The grown-ups stood at the entrance door and in the courtyard to wait for his body to come into sight. Susi and I weren't allowed to be there with them. Silvio and Stefano, had been sent to their other grandparents. Susi and I were told to go out and play in the garden at the back of the house. But we knew something extraordinary was happening and didn't want to miss it. So we went to sit quietly on the balcony, on the first floor, and kept our heads down. We had a wide open view of the whole courtyard and, to the left, we could see the women spilling out of the entrance door while they waited for the body to arrive.

My grandfather on his mule appeared first around the corner. Following him, close behind, was another mule tied to the first one by a thick rope. Both animals dribbling foam from their mouths. Slumped over the second mule, face down, hands and feet dangling, was Ziuza's husband's body wrapped in a blanket with blood seeping through it. A man walked by the side of the mule to keep an eye on the body. All you could hear was the clip-clop of the hooves in the stillness under the outrageously hot sun, until the women caught sight of him and began howling to the sky, hitting themselves, pulling their own hair, and out of rage Ziuza tore the black skirt she was wearing. It was a sorry sight.

As the body was being brought up the stairs, Susi and I scarpered to the garden. But when the body was laid in the middle of the room, we crept into the kitchen and watched through a slither of the open door. They washed the body, put a suit, shirt and tie on him, combed his hair, pulled his legs straight and folded his arms across his chest. Everyone sat in a circle around the body. Peppina led the rosary. The room filled up with visitors who'd come to pay their respects. Standing room only. The people who had killed him were there, too, offering their condolences to his widow. Ziuza spat at one man in the face. He slowly wiped the spittle off, grinned, turned around, and left.

When my family went back to Sicily, when I was aged fifteen, my grandfather had already died. My grandmother in Sicily had a similar lifestyle to Zia's in London: family, friends, drinks, and cake. Hospitality is a Sicilian custom. Guests are always welcome. But there was a big difference between the entrance to my grandmother's house and Zia's house. Grandmother's front door was always wide open during the day. My aunt Peppina used to go and pin the door back at 6.30 every morning. From

then on women, mostly dressed in black, would parade in and out of the house until sunset.

My grandfather died years before my grandmother. She died at a ripe age. Just like Zia, grandmother was a widow for years. Left on their own, aunt Peppina and grandmother used to squabble no end. Aunt Peppina had never married. And if you didn't marry in those days in Sicily, your only way out of your parents' house was in a wooden box – a white one. Grandmother used to get me breakfast: yesterday's leftover bread soaked in milky coffee and sprinkled with sugar. I'd usually have a different assortment of 'godmothers' or women relatives, clad in black, watching me having breakfast. And, as mentioned before, Ziuza, was among them until she was killed.

Custom was that when your husband died, you wore black for the rest of your life. That included black shoes, stockings, and handbag. If you didn't wear black, it meant you were on the lookout for another husband. Widowers, bachelors, any man, both far and wide, could come knocking at your door asking your hand in marriage. For the first year after a husband's death, women also wore a black headscarf when going out. If you didn't, your sadness for your husband's loss was fake. Who made up all these rules called customs? Why were women always expected to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune?

The default for women was that they were loose, 'troie.' They were born hussies. A kind of original sin. So only by her 'good' behaviour could a woman climb out of the troia category and become a decent woman. Women were obsessed with not putting a foot wrong. And the most rigorous enforcers of women's morality were women themselves.

You could be a troia for no-end of reasons. Because you smiled at a man in the street, because you wore make-up, because you wore high heels, because you wore revealing or tight clothes... Once when I was in Sicily, Peppina decided that all the clothes I'd brought over from England were troia clothes. She ran up a couple of dresses, or should I say sacks, on her Singer sewing machine. I still remember how she saw lust in everyone and sought to cover my body in long-sleeved, baggy kimono-like things.

Zia called Ziuza's son Cushi. The name means 'cousin' in Sicilian. He died about ten years back in about 2007. He emigrated to England when he knew he'd be killed if he stayed. After his mother, it would have been his turn as the eldest son. However, he

kept going backwards and forwards between Sicily and London. Doing God knows what. With God knows whom. Cushi had worked a few years for British Rail – cleaning trains – but he was caught sleeping on seats more than once, when he should have been working, and finally got fired. Since then, he refused to look for any more work. If he was unlucky, as he used to say, work would find him.

He bought a few huge run-down old houses in a run-down part of London, and rented out rooms to anyone: prostitutes, drug pushers, all low-life seemed to be there. Weekly payment on Fridays in cash. No contracts. “If you no pay, I keep your nice things and chuck rest out of window, you no come back.” He actually threw a woman out of a window once, or so it was rumoured. And he got into trouble with the police over it. He diddled electricity meters, he found a way. His hobby was poaching on country estates. If anyone questioned him about the latter, he’d say he was the gardener. The lord of the manor had given him permission.

The most horrendous episode he was involved in was the abduction and rape of a young Sicilian woman. An honour rape. His brother had fallen in love with her, she wouldn’t have anything to do with him. Her family had no mafia connections. She was easy prey. To be refused by a woman from an ‘inferior’ family is an insult to one’s honour. One morning when she was going to work, Cushi, his brother, and another man, frogmarched her into a white van. They parked the vehicle in a quiet spot. Cushi and the man kept guard while the brother attempted to rape the woman. They had the radio on loud to disguise the screaming. But, she was resistant. Cushi and the other man had to go into the van to hold her down and silence her. Word was then put around that she had been raped. She was dishonoured and had to marry him. It’s called a *matrimonio riparatore*, *meaning*: ‘a marriage that repairs.’ By marrying her, he was repairing the damage he had done. Making an honest woman out of her.

This kind of mindset was exactly what I chafed against. The reason why I have been a feminist ever since I can remember. Going on marches when I was at university and standing up for women whenever I could. Though I would never tell my daughters about these heinous acts taking place in our family. I sometimes wonder how they would react given that they do not seem particularly interested in feminism. The fighting was done by my generation, and the generations of women before mine.

Back in The Village, Cushi had become bosom friends with the Mayor. Zia helped him

recruit relatives and friends to go to Sicily and vote for Cushi's Mayor. Cushi would already be there in The Village piazza doing the meeting and greeting, simultaneously giving everyone voting instructions, along with subtle threats. Voting in accordance with your political outlook wasn't an option. Votes were for Cushi's candidate. The opposition would only get his family's votes. That was allowed. There had never been a woman candidate.

And Cushi's side knew exactly who you'd voted for. Although the ballot-papers were all alike, you'd think that your vote would be anonymous. Nothing of the sort. You gave your ballot-paper to the man standing behind the box. He put a sign on it. He would crease it slightly, on a corner, or tear it a little bit around one of the edges. Then he'd add your name to his list, 'to remember that you'd voted.' Next to your name he'd write how your ballot-paper could be singled out. They didn't even try to hide their dishonesty. I saw him. Right in front of me creasing a corner, the first time I voted in Sicily. Everyone knew. Nobody said anything. The result was that the mayor would be Cushi's puppet. Cushi was the mayor maker.

I arrive at Zia's house. She has two front doors, an outer one, and an inner one. The outer one being a wired-glass cage. She obviously thinks one door isn't enough to keep undesirables out. I remember her reason for this was that "People rob. Get in house." She opened the inner front door and, if she didn't like the look of you, she'd shout "No today," and shut it directly. She'd also had metal blinds fitted on the inside of her ground-floor windows, "Break glass. People come in." The blinds fastened at the bottom with a good chunky lock. But the smell of freshly baked cakes manages to escape through all the security measures. She is always on the bake. Trayfuls. Free to anyone who visits the house: "Mangia, mangia. Cuppa tea?" Eat here or take away. Incessant coming and going, to and from her house, every weekday afternoon was the norm.

"Zia. It's me, Maria," I call out after she has opened the inner door.

"Maria, Maria, trasi, trasi. Long time no see you." Zia is visibly moved. She hugs me tight then looks me in the eye and says: "You look like my poor sister."

"It's nice to see you again," I say to her, feeling guilty that I can't quite conjure up the

same Sicilian effusions about seeing her, although I actually love her as much as I do Susi and Silvio. They were my childhood.

"I make eclair this morning. Cuppa tea?" Zia says to me, then she shouts "Maria here," to her guests in the living room, as I wipe my shoes on the doormat.

"Yes, please, Zia. That would be great," I say as I follow her down the yellow-painted corridor, like Sicilian sun, with prints of saints on the walls on one side, and Popes on the other, chronologically ordered so that Pope Pius XII is the first in line, and the present Pope Francis is nearer the living room door. Though there is space for more before she gets to the door frame.

The eclair is already there waiting for me. I greet Angelina and her daughter Provvi, and another woman who I don't know. This lady is just leaving. Zia goes to show her out saying "I see you next week."

The living room floor is still covered with chequered light-blue and black lino tiles. I remember Zia and my mother laying them down after brushing glue onto each tile, then stamping them down into place with their feet. Susi and I did a bit of jumping up and down on the tiles, too. The wallpaper is new: orange roses with big green leaves on a white background. Clara, as an art historian, would be horrified if she saw this décor. Zia still has her wedding photo standing on the sideboard in an aluminium frame. And next to that, she has Silvio and Stefano's wedding photos, and a few of her grandchildren. Zia has decided to forget about Susi's disastrous marriage. In the middle of the room is a big wooden table, and on this table a tray of eclairs, a teapot and pink flowered cups and saucers. All very English. Chairs scattered wherever there's a space. The room is a thoroughfare. It has four doors. Three in a row along one side: from left to right, the pantry door, the corridor, and the sitting-room door. On the opposite side is a door leading to the kitchen. I notice the pantry door is padlocked.

As Zia is still chatting with her departing visitor, I sit with Angelina and Provvi. Angelina has an identical twin living in The Village called Beatrice. Both Angelina and Beatrice's husbands died together in the same car accident in Sicily years back. There had been a lot of talk about identical twins losing their husbands at the identical time. It was too much of a coincidence, people murmured.

Angelina looks straight at me, squints and asks "Do you live near the Thames?" It

comes across as an accusation. As if it were a crime to be well-off. Lucky she doesn't know about the cottage and the chalet. We keep those secret.

"Ma, you know she lives near the river," Provvi butts in.

"Yes, I live in a flat near the Thames towpath," I nod, smiling at Provvi as if to say 'It's OK, I know their ways.' Angelina, like the others in the community, can't stomach that I have moved away from them, and have thrived by that decision.

"Good place. You've got money. You don't work. Your husband works for you," Angelina goes on.

I detect a tinge of envy, and give her a half smile.

"Ma, stop it!" Provvi huffs, red with embarrassment.

A noticeable bruise peeps over Provvi's neckline as she bends down to pick up her handbag. "We need to go now. We've got to get some shopping before we go home."

They bid me goodbye, kiss me on both cheeks, pick up their cake box and go to the front door where Zia is still yabbering to the other woman. Zia is full of flowery apologies saying that they mustn't go, that she is all theirs now. But the mother and daughter insist that they must leave otherwise they won't get their shopping done before Provvi's boys finish school.

Zia's expression has changed, softer; she is motherly towards me. "Long time no see," Zia says looking at me, smiling, and picking up her knitting. She's still making bed socks. Her bed socks accompanied me through my childhood as my feet grew. Mostly pink, sometimes yellow the colour of lemons and the Sicilian sun, Zia used to say. These were mint green. I knew the style. Ribbed above the ankles, leaving little eyelets for a crocheted cord to run through, then adding a pompom onto each end, nicely anchored so the cord wouldn't come out when you untied the bow in the morning. She used to make baby-blue ones for Silvio and we'd laugh about them.

Feeling a bit guilty, I say: "Zia, I'm only just getting on top of things. You know, I had the flat to look after, the family and work..."

"You can no make minute for you Zia."

I feel fleeting pity for her. She has aged so much. Such a thin face. I might not have

recognised her, if I'd passed her in the street. I am her only niece. She has some on her husband's side of the family, but they mean nothing to her.

"Of course, I will make more of an effort in future, Zia, I promise."

"And you keep promise for Zia."

I nod. We go on talking for a while about our families. She's very interested and wants to know everything about my new grandson. Then we talk about neighbours. She tells me an Italian family from Naples lives on one side and an English family on the other. Zia doesn't have much to do with the English family, while she's great friends with the Italian lady, when they are not squabbling. "Napoli is not Sicilia," Zia says. Nobody is superior to Sicilians in Zia's view of the world. A blessed island.

I shouldn't have told her, but given it's been niggling me, I spurt out the bike incident.

"Zia, I've had a little problem with one of the residents..."

"You live posh house. You no have problem."

"Unfortunately, some people behave like children."

She doesn't look up, concentrates on her knitting until I tell her about the insulting graffiti. She stops knitting.

"Minghia! They call you arsehole?" she asks raising her voice. "Nobody call daughter of my poor sister bucu du culu!"

"Exactly. It's bad, isn't it?"

"And you no break big bastardo face? You know we have cousin, picciotti..."

"Zia, I don't even know who it is."

"We no kill. But we make revenge."

I look at her, "What?!"

"You give him my cake, give him big diarrhoea. He shit for one army."

"Zia, are you putting laxative into cakes? I don't believe it..."

“You no believe because you Englishwoman. You marry Englishman. You read book. I tell you, you find this man. I make special cake for him.”

The door bell rings. Zia goes to see who it is from behind the net curtain, “Ah, Bella and Rosa,” she says, looking directly at me, “they du big bagasci, my husband Tony two niece.”

When they come in through the door, Zia embraces them as if they are two long-lost sisters, “Bella! Rosa! Trasi, trasi. I wait for you. I make special eclair for you.”

Amongst all the greeting and shouting coming from all directions, I take advantage of the confusion, say I need to go and cook dinner, bid the ladies ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye.’ Zia grabs me by the arm and says: “Yes, you come back tomorrow. You keep promise for Zia. I have friend. She have problem, she need you help.” Then she shoves a couple of eclairs in my hand, wrapped in aluminium foil, for Humps.

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