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Visibility

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Published by Harper

Extract

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Harper
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

This paperback edition 2007
1

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins*Publishers* 2006

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A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978 0 00 711948 6

Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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4TH DECEMBER 1952

THURSDAY

The fog was coming, without and within.

On the far side of the river, the first smoky tresses were stroking the rooftops with fingers as slim and elegant as a concert pianist's. If a man had watched for a while, he would have seen the mist crawling slowly across the cityscape, its purposeful stealth that of a prowling cat.

And if a man had watched for a while, he might have felt the first hazings in his head, a gauze which would make the world opaque and through which he would have to reach for his very thoughts.

The fog had come before, but rarely with such purpose. Londoners were nothing if not survivors, however, and they knew when trouble was ahead. Certainly they needed no warning from the weathermen to brace themselves for a bad one.

New Scotland Yard was a riverside riot of turrets, crenellations, and people; a Gothic extravagance

that swallowed thousands of worker bees every morning and spat them out again come dusk. Overcrowding was a permanent endemic; the place had grown like Topsy, with new buildings added every few decades to ease the strain, but the problem remained resolutely unallayed. Bounded by the Thames in front and Whitehall to the rear, New Scotland Yard's room for expansion was running out fast.

Shifts in the Metropolitan Police's Murder Squad came in threes: the morning, 6 a.m. until 2 p.m.; the afternoon, 2 p.m. until 10 p.m.; and the night, 10 p.m. until 6 a.m. On the days when Herbert Smith, once of the British Army, latterly of MI5, and now a member of said Murder Squad, was scheduled for the afternoon slot, he liked to lunch beforehand with no company save for that afforded by a pie, a pint, the *Evening Standard*, and *The Times* crossword. He frequented a pub off Smith Square, which at ten minutes' walking distance from the Yard was at least twice as far as any of his colleagues were liable to venture, even those adventurous enough to seek grounds more exotic than those of the staff canteen.

This day, he read Milton Shulman's film reviews in the early edition of the *Evening Standard*, making a mental note to go and see *The Narrow Margin* at the London Pavilion ('an exciting journey' wrote Shulman), and to miss *The Road to Bali*, on at the Plaza and succinctly dismissed as 'a cul-de-sac'. Herbert usually found Shulman's opinions pretty

accurate, though as he only ever went to the cinema on his own, he had never discovered whether this was a majority opinion or not.

The *Standard* duly read, he polished off three-quarters of *The Times* crossword – particularly proud of decoding *Writing implement dripped red ink?* (7) as 'N-I-B-B-L-E-D' – and found without surprise that forcing himself into the office was a genuine physical strain.

It was not that he wanted to stay in the pub – he was not a big drinker – but simply that anywhere was surely better than another afternoon in the office.

There, in a nutshell, was the contradiction at the heart of working the murder beat. Days in the Yard, cramped, airless and noisy, were dreadful; but to get out of there, someone had to have been killed, and Herbert had seen enough violent death in his time not to wish for more of it.

And, if he was to be honest, cramped, airless and noisy weren't the half of it. No one else on the Murder Squad seemed to mind the conditions, but then no one else on the Murder Squad felt as though their presence was at best tolerated and at worst resented.

Herbert was not One of Them. He hadn't done his time in the ranks, and he was still learning how to do things the Scotland Yard way. As far as his colleagues were concerned, therefore, his time at Five might as well have been a sojourn in the inner circles of Hell. Suspicion between arms

of the law was always bad; when an espionage service was involved, it was exacerbated tenfold.

Of the five men round the table when Herbert walked into the office, only Tyce and Veal acknowledged him, and only Veal did so with anything that approximated a greeting in recognised English. Tyce gave a curt nod. The others, Connolly, Tulloch and Bradley, glanced at him as though he were something the cat had brought in, and turned their attention back to the matter at hand; that matter being the case of Christopher Craig, an unlovely, manipulative psychopath, and Derek Bentley, an illiterate, impressionable epileptic, who had broken into a warehouse in Croydon the previous month.

The police had arrived. Craig had drawn a gun. Bentley had shouted: 'Let him have it, Chris.'

A plea to surrender the weapon, or an exhortation to murder?

Craig, clearly taking it as the latter – assuming that he had listened to Bentley at all, which given their relationship seemed unlikely – had shot two policemen. Detective Constable Frederick Fairfax was hit in the shoulder, painful but not too serious. Police Constable Sidney Miles was killed.

Killing a policeman was so far beyond the pale as to be invisible. Bentley and Craig were due to stand trial at the Old Bailey the coming Tuesday, the ninth, and there was not one man in Scotland Yard who felt anything other than that they should both be convicted of murder.

No, that was not quite true. There was one man

who felt otherwise, one man only – and that man was Herbert.

The problem, as far as Herbert was concerned, was this. The death penalty applied only to those over eighteen. Craig, who deserved to hang as much as anyone Herbert had ever encountered, was only sixteen. Even if he was found guilty, he would not be executed.

But Bentley was nineteen, and he would surely swing; even though his mind was that of a child, even though he had not fired the fatal shot, and even though he was less Craig's friend than his plaything.

Uniquely amongst his peers, Herbert felt that Bentley had been asking Craig to hand over the weapon; for if Herbert was sure of anything, it was that he knew a victim when he saw one.

He had expressed these thoughts to his colleagues once, and they had made it clear that once was once too many.

So now they hunched round a table and discussed the trial next week; specifically, what they termed strategy for their appearances in the witness box, and what the cynical would have called getting their stories straight.

Herbert's colleagues departed to continue their discussions in the pub sometime around dusk, leaving Herbert marooned in the office while another afternoon exodus ebbed and flowed around him. From the window, he saw that the

fog was thickening now, diffusing the street lamps into haloes of dull gold. People scurried beneath with collars up and chins down.

He sensed a communal disillusion with the weather. The previous day had been magical, one of those winter days which made one believe sincerely that England was God's own country: skies of lapis lazuli, air so crisp that it fizzed on the way down to one's lungs, and a cheerful sunshine dappling lightly through bare branches. Now there was only filthy, moist grey shot through with traces of sulphur.

Bradley and Tulloch returned about six, realising that, much as they might have been tempted to, they could not in all conscience leave Herbert minding the fort indefinitely. Not that there was much to do; the steady trilling of phones throughout the afternoon had dwindled to a trickle by the time they came back, and the call at eight o'clock was the first in more than an hour.

Neither Bradley nor Tulloch showed much inclination to answer it.

Bradley did not even move; he might have been a stone Aztec, Herbert thought, forever phlegmatic and unflappable, completely unreadable even to as adept an observer as Herbert.

Tulloch, cut off midway through a rant about whichever aspect of modern society had most recently attracted his ire, clicked his tongue angrily, as though the call had been made purely to irritate

him. He tended to treat all crimes as a personal slight, or at least an institutional one, as if the very existence of the police force should have been enough to stop the forces of lawlessness and disorder in their tracks.

Herbert let the phone ring a few times for form's sake, and then picked up.

'New Scotland Yard,' he said.

'Is that the Murder Squad?' A young man's voice, breathless with excitement.

Herbert felt a brief twinge in his gut; apprehension and excitement tangling.

'That's right.'

'This is Sergeant Elkington, in Hyde Park. I've got a floater in the Long Water.'

Elkington stumbled over the word 'floater', as if its use implied a casual machismo that he did not really possess.

Herbert sighed. Fogs always brought death; people who couldn't see where they were going and tipped off walls or into rivers, usually. Had Herbert been a betting man, he would have considered an accumulator; that this floater, as Elkington had so unconvincingly referred to it, had had a few drinks inside him when he had walked into the water, and that he wouldn't be the last.

Herbert looked at his colleagues, rolled his eyes, and made a drinking gesture.

Bradley stared back, his expression altered not a jot. Tulloch ground his teeth in silent fury at the world.

Herbert wondered why he bothered. A simple human connection, that was all he was trying to establish. Perhaps the day he stopped trying was the day it would happen.

He turned his attention back to Elkington. 'Any reason you're calling me . . . ?'

'Sergeant Elkington,' Elkington repeated, in case Herbert hadn't got it the first time. 'No more than the usual. Just taking precautions.'

Herbert now knew exactly the kind of policeman Elkington was: the Janus sort, always looking to cover his behind so that if anything went wrong he had already and demonstrably passed the buck, all the while squinting forward through ambition-slitted eyes, so that if anything went right he was in position to claim as much credit as possible.

The biggest excitement in the Hyde Park police station was locking the park gates every night. Herbert was sure Elkington wouldn't be there long; he would get himself transferred as soon as possible, treating every case as a possible key to the door which led out and up.

Herbert considered a moment. Neither Bradley nor Tulloch would want the case. They had wives and children, and they needed a new case this late in the day like a hole in the head. At best, it would be a false alarm; at worst, a serious drain on their Friday, possibly their weekend too.

A cold, foggy night; a warm room for once mercifully quiet.

No contest.

'Where's the body?' Herbert asked.

'By the Peter Pan statue,' Elkington said.

Herbert told Bradley and Tulloch where he was going, and promised to call in the moment he had something concrete. 'Any time after ten,' Tulloch said; meaning Herbert could call as much as he liked, once the night shift had come on and Tulloch had gone home. He wasn't joking.

Herbert took a car from the pool and almost immediately regretted it. The fog was already thick enough to make driving difficult, and Herbert lost his way twice, even on roads he was sure he knew like the back of his hand. Headlights were little use; they simply bounced back off the thick particles of mist.

Eventually, he parked round the back of the Albert Hall and completed the journey on foot, his breath billowing in lung-shaped plumes around his head as he hurried forward against the cold.

Elkington had ensured that the scene was lit by flaming torches, as though it were some sort of pagan funeral. The edge of the water was blotched with ice, and covered in what looked like a thin film of powdered graphite. Herbert wondered for a moment where this film could have come from, and realised with a start that it must have settled there from the fog. What other particles the mist was carrying, and what was settling inside his lungs every time he inhaled, scarcely bore consideration.

The Long Water was a dammed river; effectively a lake, therefore, without a current. The floater was a few yards from shore. It was lying face down, as corpses tended to, with its limbs and head hanging lower than its torso. Perfectly motionless, it could have been a jellyfish.

Elkington looked even younger than he sounded, cold-reddened cheeks smooth beneath a pile of dirty blond hair.

'I've touched nothing, sir,' Elkington said. 'All I've done is call you and seal the scene; twenty yards in every direction.' Twenty yards was already beyond the limits of visibility; Elkington's gestures indicated nothing but fog. 'That's correct procedure, isn't it, sir?'

Herbert had been dead right about the kind of person Elkington was. His initial deduction now seemed less inspired guesswork than impeccable snap judgement. Still, he reflected, at least it was a pleasant change to have someone look up to him, after the stonewalling indifference he faced back at the Yard.

'That is indeed,' Herbert said.

'The way you would have done it?'

'Don't tell me – you've always wanted to work in the Murder Squad.'

'As a matter of fact, sir, I have.'

'Then you can start by telling me who found the body.'

'I did.' If Elkington had put his hand up and started shouting *Me, sir, me, me*, it would not have

surprised Herbert in the slightest. 'When I was doing my rounds.'

'You were alone?'

'No, sir. I was with Flew and Hare. Here, sir.'

He indicated the constables either side of him. Flew had a neat, slightly effete face framed by a mass of curly black hair. Hare's nose kinked halfway down before setting off at a tangent to its original course; broken and badly reset, Herbert thought. Like Elkington, neither looked old enough to be shaving yet, let alone policing.

Herbert nodded at Flew and Hare, and they waded into the water with a synchronicity of which twins would have been proud.

Elkington made a sign of the cross, which Herbert might have found touching had Elkington not checked first to see whether he was watching.

There was an autopsy unit at Imperial College, less than a mile away on Exhibition Road. The pathologist, a small man whose glasses were as round and shiny as the top of his head, was waiting for Herbert in the foyer.

'Rathbone,' he said simply.

Rathbone, Elkington, Flew, Hare; didn't these people have Christian names?

Herbert and Rathbone shook hands.

'Right then, right then.' Rathbone's voice rose and fell in twittering ululations. 'Let's get on with it, yes?'

There would soon be a backlog, he explained

en route to the autopsy room; pedestrians hit by cars travelling too fast in the murk, elderly people for whom the extra pollution would prove too much.

Herbert supposed it lucky that the body had been found before the rush.

It could not have been in the water long, for it was still recognisably human, more than enough for Herbert to imagine what the man must have been like in life.

He rattled through the alphabetical checklist that had been drummed into him during Five's surveillance training. A for age: mid-twenties. B for build: medium, as far as he could tell under the man's dark suit, which took him neatly on to C for clothes – white shirt, crimson tie, dapper black shoes, no hat. No surprise in any of that; men invariably wore a jacket and tie, whatever they were doing and wherever they were going. Strange not to have been wearing a coat in this weather, though.

No Distinguishing Marks. Ethnic Origin: Caucasian. F for Face, in this case somewhat cherubic, even through the post-mortem swelling. No Glasses, at least none still hooked over the ears; and, since he was dead, no chance to ascertain his Gait. His Hair was blond and floppy. He carried no Items.

All this had gone through Herbert's head in less than a second.

Rathbone stripped the body quickly and efficiently until it was laid out in inglorious nudity

on the examination table. Herbert supposed that pathology, with all its emphasis on the clinical and chemical, was intended to sanitise death. Here, it seemed to have exactly the opposite effect, making it even more revolting than Herbert had thought possible.

'You understand,' Rathbone said, 'that drownings are usually suicides or accidents, yes? There are plenty of easier ways to murder someone.'

'I understand.'

'And it's very difficult to tell whether someone was drowned at all, as opposed to being immersed in water post-mortem, yes? Let alone whether they were drowned voluntarily or against their will.'

'All I'd like you to do is to tell me how he died, and who he was.'

'Well, ha ha, I'm no alchemist, Detective Inspector . . . ?'

'Smith.'

'First things first, yes? Let's find out how long it's been there.'

It's, Herbert noticed, not *he's*. Well, that was only to be expected. If he had had corpses coming across his table as though on a conveyor belt, he would probably have tried to regard them as objects rather than human too.

Rathbone took a thermometer and rolled the body on to its side. It stared at Herbert with bulbous eyes in which he read accusing disappointment. The corpse's cheeks were swollen and its skin wrinkled,

like a washerwoman's hands. Drained of colour, its face seemed to leach into the air.

Rathbone pushed the thermometer towards the rectum, and stopped.

'What?' Herbert said.

Rathbone placed a hand on each of the dead man's buttocks, pulled them apart, and nodded for Herbert to come closer.

Herbert thought of several snappy replies, all of them inappropriate.

He stepped forward, looked, and winced.

The man's backside was a disaster zone; red raw, swollen into puffy ridges of flesh, and criss-crossed with scratch marks.

'Raped?' Herbert said.

Rathbone shook his head. 'Not tonight. Many of these marks are several days old.'

'Homosexual, then. And practising.'

'Very.'

All things being equal, Herbert would rather this particular can of worms had remained unopened. Homosexuality was illegal – 'gross indecency contrary to Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885', as the law had it. Like most things illicit, it was also widespread, albeit necessarily furtive.

Every queer therefore lived with the same question: who knew? Among their own, they were usually safe; but, if caught, they faced chemical castration, the introduction of female hormones for what the law saw as their abnormal and

uncontrollable sexual urges. Oestrogen would make them impotent and obese, their looks suffocated in a welter of fat, their touting reduced to receiver status only.

As King George V had famously, or infamously, said about homosexuals: 'I thought men like that shot themselves.'

Herbert had no particular beef against homosexuals, certainly not by the prevailing standards of intolerance. He simply did not relish the prospect of poking around a closed community trying to find a truth that was liable, like many deaths, to end up being petty and sordid.

Rathbone busied himself around the man's rear end for a few moments.

'No trace evidence,' he announced at length. 'No body fluids.'

'You mean he'd taken a bath since his last, er, last . . .'

'Encounter?'

'Exactly.'

'Probably. But the water in the park could have washed such evidence off, yes?'

'The Long Water has no current. It's like a millpond tonight.'

Rathbone pursed his lips and nodded. 'Unlikely, then.'

He inserted the thermometer into the corpse's rectum, waited a few moments, extracted it and read off the digits.

'Eighty-eight degrees.' He looked at his watch.

'It's half past nine now. Normal body temperature is ninety-eight degrees. Bodies in water cool at about five or six degrees an hour, twice as fast as they do in air, yes? But these measures are approximate. Very generally, therefore, I would estimate the time of death at between half past six and eight o'clock this evening.'

In other words, not long before the body had been found; eight o'clock was when Elkington had phoned.

'You might want to go outside for this next part, yes?' Rathbone said.

'I'm not squeamish.'

Rathbone shrugged – *suit yourself* – took a small handsaw, and began to slice at the cadaver's right shoulder.

He was right. Herbert did want to go outside.

After a small eternity while Herbert waited in the corridor, Rathbone popped his head round the door and beckoned him back inside.

Herbert followed him through, and almost immediately went straight back out again. The subject – see, Herbert was already beginning to think like Rathbone; hard not to, when they were in a glorified butcher's shop – had been sliced open in three neat cuts, a perfect Y from shoulders to sternum and sternum to waist.

Rathbone picked up a lung. Patterned in marbles of grey and crimson, it shifted over the inside of his forearms, an outsize bladder which gave the disconcerting impression of being alive.

It looked far too big to have ever fitted inside the dead man.

Rathbone placed the lung in a metal tray, picked up a knife, and sliced into it. Dirty water spurted from the gash.

How Herbert managed not to vomit, he had no idea.

'As I thought.' Rathbone seemed pleased. 'Fluid.'

'I can see that.'

'No, no. Fluid, which you get only when air and water have been actively inspired. Passive flooding of lungs with water – in other words, post-mortem – looks quite different, yes? And see –' he indicated above and around the dead man's mouth – 'the froth? Fine and white? Must still have been breathing, yes?'

Rathbone tripped over to a set of scales and lifted a small bag from the bowl. 'The stomach. Pretty full.'

'He had just eaten, then?'

'A few hours before. Perhaps a late lunch. Shepherd's pie and cabbage, at a guess. Also weeds, silt and dirty water. Lake water. Not the kind of thing you get even in the most disreputable of restaurants, yes?' By the time Herbert realised that Rathbone had, in his own way, cracked a joke, the pathologist had moved on. 'When the victim's dead before entering the water, very little matter gets as far as the stomach. What you find is usually confined to the pharynx, trachea and larger airways, yes?'

So the corpse, whoever he was, had drowned, rather than being placed in the water after his death.

Accident, suicide, or murder?

He had drowned in shallow water, at a point where it was easy to enter the water, but equally easy to walk out again. It was therefore unlikely to have been an accident, unless he was dead drunk, which seemed improbable given the time frame involved; drunks tended to die later in the evening.

Rathbone would test for alcohol, of course, but both he and Herbert were thinking the same thing: the corpse did not have the look of a drinker.

Suicide was always a possibility, especially in the winter, when long nights and unremitting gloom could drive the heartiest of fellows to despair. Every suicide involved a great deal of resolve – Herbert had no truck with those who glibly dismissed it as the coward's way out, as he imagined that few things involved more courage than the decision to kill oneself – but drowning oneself in a still, shallow body of water took more determination than most. There were many easier methods, especially for men, who tended to prefer the more violent methods of exit.

Which left only murder.

Rathbone wanted to run more tests, so Herbert found a phone and rang the Yard.

'Yes?' Tulloch's voice was even more loaded

with rage than usual, and when Herbert glanced at his watch he saw why; it was ten to ten.

He batted away a pang of childish pleasure at inconveniencing Tulloch. 'It's Smith.'

'What do you want?'

'To tell you about the dead man.'

'Couldn't you have waited? He's not going anywhere, is he?'

'No, but I am.'

Tulloch sighed. 'Right. Tell me what you've got. And keep it short. Name?'

'Unknown.'

'Cause of death?'

'Drowning. Probably forcible.'

'Probably?'

'The pathologist's running tests as we speak.'

'Is there anything you *do* know?'

'He was a homosexual.'

'Your ideal case, then.'

Herbert chose to ignore this last remark. 'There's not much more I'll be able to do tonight, so I'll come in tomorrow morning after breakfast and take it up from there.'

'And put in for overtime, no doubt.'

The last time the topic of overtime had come up, Herbert remembered, Tulloch had contended that the whole system was skewed. The men who needed the money for their families were the ones who couldn't afford the time to make that money, he said; in contrast, the ones who had the time to spare had nothing to spend the money on.