Murder Plot

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Extract

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When I started work in Thornton Heath in 1975, over thirty years ago now, what had once been a picturesque country village in the mid–nineteenth century had long gone. Caught in the riptide of London's relentless march towards its unstated and perhaps unintended goal of becoming a global supercity, it had barely survived as an entity. To the rest of the world it had become just another place name along the route of the A23 as that great thoroughfare made its serpiginous way from central London down to Brighton; Balham, Streatham, Norbury, Thornton Heath, Croydon, on and on, superficially anonymous place after superficially anonymous place, the only real signs of progress for the traveller along this route being a gradual easing of the urban blight, a reduction in decrepitude, more green space, less claustrophobia, albeit only after the southern edge of Croydon had been passed.

Yet, to those of us who came to know it, Thornton Heath was much, much more. Although it had no clear boundaries—passage to it from Norbury, or West Croydon, or Norwood was imperceptible unless one spotted the signs, black writing on white, that proclaimed one had arrived—once there, one could sense something about the place, something that was special, something that was unique, something almost magical.

And dark…

You see, I soon discovered that Thornton Heath in the nineteen-seventies harboured an astonishingly high number of murderers.



'This has to be the wildest of wild-goose chases,' I said to myself as I drove away. Yet there had been something so confident about the way Wilhelmina had announced Charlie Daniels's death on the allotment site that I couldn't treat it as such; not yet anyway. Accordingly, I drove along Mayfield Road with some curiosity but little expectation that I was doing anything other than wasting my time.

Thornton Heath Horticulture and Allotment Association was based near Gonville Primary School, at the bottom of Mayfield Road, just beyond the recreation ground—known locally as 'The Rec'—and I knew it so well. When I was a child, I would accompany my father every Sunday morning over here. His allotment was his pride and joy, although I don't think he ever won anything in the biannual flower and produce show. This place was part of me, part of what made me the person I was, although I had not been back for twenty-five years.

It consisted of an area of several acres that was marked out into strips of land of either five or ten rods' length; even in those hazy, lazy pre-metric days when decimalisation was still new and regarded with deep suspicion at best, deep loathing at worst, this idea of a 'rod' as a unit of length seemed faintly anachronistic, but somehow fitting. Here was a return to medieval strip farming, so what could be more appropriate than

to use an ancient unit of measurement? Wide tracks with patchy grass growing along their centres divided the allotments into rows two plots wide; water tanks were dotted along their sides, filled from underground pipes, the flow controlled by ballcocks. Sheds of varying size and condition abounded. Between each plot there was a narrow grassy path.

Some of the allotments were immaculate, their neatness worthy of a prize; rows of weedless lettuces and beetroot, wigwams of bean-sticks, potatoes erupting from long hillocks of earth and raspberry canes trained along wires, together forming a degree of order and rightness that could not fail to please the eye and gladden the mind. Others—only a minority, though—were less assiduously tended and were left more to Nature's remorseless appetites. These eyesores were frowned upon by the Allotment Association's zealous committee and, should there be continuous or repeated transgression, retribution was swift and merciless—expulsion and disgrace.

I could see a small crowd, perhaps three hundred yards in the distance, and made my way over to it, still refusing to believe that there could possibly be anything in Wilhelmina's apparently prophetic pronouncement. The smell of new-mown grass that came to me on the warm summer breeze was almost heady. It had rained the night before and there was still some dampness left in the longer grass, although the soil had pretty much dried off.

The allotment on which my welcoming party was assembled was wonderfully kept without, as far as I could see, a single weed to spoil the view; unfortunately, the same could not be said of its neighbour, which had clearly remained untended for many months and which now resembled a jungle of brambles, dandelions, buttercups, dock plants and long grass. I could just make out that once there had been order, for in amongst this riot of weeds stood some bean-sticks and a shed that was close to falling down.

As I approached the group, I could see that there were four

people standing, while one was on his knees. Of the four standing, two were men and two were women; they were looking down at the man who was kneeling, their faces all bearing expressions of curiosity, their bodies bending forward slightly at the hips as they peered around the kneeling man to get a better view. Their average age must have been seventy and they all wore clothes that were old and patched and muddied. I recognised two of them as patients from the surgery—Major Williams and his wife, Marjorie—but the others were strangers. They heard me approaching and turned to face me.

Major Williams spoke. 'Dr Elliot. Thank goodness. There's something the matter with Charlie.' He turned at once to the other members of the audience. 'Stand aside. Let the doctor through.'

He spoke with authority, a soldier used to having orders obeyed, and they parted to let me through. He was only of average height but his gait and bearing suggested that he was striving for something better; I knew that he had seen service somewhere hot and sunny because the skin of his face was aged and there were scattered blemishes on his cheeks and forehead. The man who was kneeling stood up; he looked shocked, distressed and was slightly breathless—and it immediately became obvious why. Half in and half out of the small shed, the body of a man lay stretched; he was dressed like those around him, although I could not see his face immediately as he was in partial darkness, but the Major's use of the name Charlie had not passed me by.

Without saying a word, I knelt down beside the prostrate form, placing my black leather bag on the other side beside a pile of clay flowerpots and a tattered packet of Garotta. Now I could get a clear view of his face, I could see that it was indeed Charlie Daniels, just as Wilhelmina had said.

In life, Charlie had been quite a handsome man. Between fifty and sixty years of age, he had been small and compact, but lean and muscular. He shaved his head and had bright blue

eyes above a smile that I had always considered impertinent but tolerable.

Not now, though.

Now he was dead. Still warm, but his eyes were clouded, the muscles of his face relaxed so that his expression had altered slightly. His mouth was open and I could see that the back of his throat looked reddened and inflamed. I didn't need the stethoscope from the bag but I used it anyway, applying it to the cooling, almost rubbery skin to listen for breathing sounds that were not there, after my fingertips had failed to find a pulse. He had been dead less than an hour, perhaps only thirty minutes, I reckoned.

I sighed and stood up, because that is what doctors do when they've just diagnosed death. 'I'm sorry.'

The man who had been kneeling blurted out, 'But he can't be!' He was a tall but stooped man who had a red, slightly swollen nose that was rough-skinned, covered in broken veins. I judged him to be in his mid-seventies, but he still looked fit and strong.

The woman who was a stranger to me said, 'Oh…' She began to weep, finding a crumpled handkerchief up the sleeve of her lilac cardigan. Everyone else looked respectful and sad. Major Williams put his arm around the weeping woman and murmured, 'There, there, Agnes.'

The tall man said again, 'He can't be.' He said it as if to himself while looking down at the body.

'Who found him?'

The same man said, 'I did. I came over to water my onions. I saw his shed was open, but didn't think nothing of it.' He turned to the rest of the audience. 'I thought he was over in the Hut, or something,' he said, as if by way of exoneration. 'He'd said that he wanted to sort out the storeroom.'

There was a general nodding of heads at this and he turned back to me now that he felt excused by his compatriots. 'Charlie runs the Hut, you see.'

'The Hut' was the shop for the society.

Under the impression that I had no knowledge of 'the Hut', he apparently decided to give it a plug. 'Get anything cheap in there, you can…' There was a brief pause before he qualified this with, 'If it's for gardening.'

My hopes of buying an inexpensive Aston Martin dashed, I nudged matters gently back on track. 'What happened then?'

'Well, after about a quarter of an hour, I suddenly realised that it was a bit odd, his shed being open and him not around. Someone tried to break into his shed last month, and since then he'd been very particular about locking it up.'

My brief acquaintance with the inside of Charlie's shed did not provide to my eyes much of a motive for anyone to want to break in, unless the sudden quadrupling of world Garotta price levels had passed me by, but I said nothing and the man with the red nose continued, 'So I came over. My plot's just over there.'

He indicated the allotment on the other side of the bramble jungle beside Charlie Daniels's demesne.

'And you found him like this?'

He nodded.

'He was still? Not moving, or groaning?'

'No.' Then, he added for no good reason, 'He was just like that when I found him.'

'What did you do then?'

'I ran for help.'

'To us.' This from the woman whom the Major had addressed as Agnes; she would not have been stout had she been six inches taller, but would most certainly have been even more frightening; just looking at her reminded me of the nit nurse at school who used to hold us in a vice-like grip around the larynx with one hand while pulling out our hair with the other, all in the cause of her relentless pursuit of head lice.

She stepped forward. In an accent that sounded slightly too

cut-glass to be true, she announced, 'I'm Mrs Agnes Geraghty. This is my husband, Mr Walter Geraghty.' A taller gentleman with black thick-framed spectacles and a hearing-aid nodded at me and smiled.

She carried on, 'We were working over there.' She pointed further along the track to some of the plots I had driven past. 'I told Walter to go to the phone box and phone for an ambulance while I came back with John.'

On cue, the noise of a bell began to sound in the distance and Walter Geraghty looked at me curiously from beneath what was clearly a wig. 'I say, old chap, just how did you come to get here so quickly?'

Wilhelmina Wylie and her supernatural injunction for me to make my way here had temporarily slipped from my mind, but now returned with a short, sharp jolt. I searched the horizon and eventually located the spire of The Rectory rising above the other roofs.

How did you know, Wilhelmina? How did you know, confined to your attic and dying, what had happened?

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