The Bookseller

Also by Tim Sullivan

The Dentist
The Cyclist
The Patient
The Politician
The Monk
The Teacher

Short Stories
The Lost Boys
The Ex-Wife
The Hunter

The Bookseller

A **DS GEORGE CROSS** THRILLER

TIM SULLIVAN

An Aries Book

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For Steve Hawes, with thanks for all the encouragement early in my career and a year-long tutorial in Simenon's Jules Maigret, whose presence, I hope, haunts these pages occasionally, looking over George's shoulder, and whispering cogent words of advice.

Prologue

'I have cancer, George.'

Raymond and his son George Cross were sitting in the presbytery kitchen of their friend Stephen, who also happened to be a Catholic parish priest.

George didn't react at all to this information, initially.

Then, 'I see. Where?' asked George.

'It's in my lung.'

'Has it spread?'

'Not as far as we know,' replied his father.

'What's the prognosis?' George continued, flatly.

'Difficult to say. But they're fairly optimistic. It's the kind of cancer that is operable and can normally be got out cleanly. A carcinoid. If that happens, then I should be clear,' Raymond said as positively as he could frame it.

George made a note of this. He then glanced around Stephen's kitchen.

'Why have we come here for you to tell me this?' he asked.

'In case you want to talk,' Stephen replied.

'With whom?' George asked.

'Me,' the priest replied.

'You're not an oncologist,' Cross pointed out.

Stephen smiled. 'I am not,' he agreed.

'Then I don't know exactly what we would talk about in this situation.'

'Your feelings, perhaps?' replied the priest.

Cross ignored this and turned back to his father.

'What are the next steps in your treatment?' he asked.

'Surgery.'

'Nothing else?'

'No, I'm very lucky. Like I said, it's a carcinoid and completely operable. I'll be cancer free afterwards, with no need for chemo, hopefully.'

'But not definitely.'

'No.'

'When is your next appointment with the oncologist?'

'The week before the op.'

'Which is when?'

'Six weeks.'

'No, that won't do. We'll need an appointment this week,' Cross insisted.

'What for?'

'Because I have some questions, and I think speaking to a consultant oncologist will be of more value to me than a Catholic priest.'

'Now you're just being rude, son,' replied Raymond.

George knew that his father only referred to him as 'son' when he was upset with him.

'It's not my intention to be rude. Just practical. Is that everything?' he asked.

'I'll call the surgeon,' said Raymond.

'What's his name?' asked George.

'Mr Moseby.'

George made a note of this, got up and left. Partly because he didn't want to cause any further inadvertent offence to anyone. But also because he wanted to get home and start researching carcinoids, together with this Mr Moseby. He needed to be armed with as much information as possible, before he met his father's consultant.

'I'm sorry, Father,' Raymond said as the kitchen door closed behind his son.

'Nonsense. He's upset. He just doesn't know it yet,' replied the priest, causing Raymond to smile at how well Stephen knew his son.

As George cycled away from the church he wasn't feeling at all upset. Concerned, yes. Surprised, no. His father had as much as told him something was amiss the week before. His father never lied to him. So, he was certain that if the diagnosis was terminal his father would have just come out and said so. He thought he was right about this or, if not, that he wasn't as au fait with how most parents function when it came to protecting their children from unpleasant news. George had to meet the surgeon, because if it came to his father's having to make any choices of a medical nature, he wanted to be involved. He was also aware that this was something one should do for a parent of advancing years. He would attempt to be helpful, rather than overbearing. But even as he thought of this, he knew the likelihood of it happening wasn't perhaps as great as it ideally should've been.

When he arrived home, he got straight onto his computer with the enthusiasm of an amateur genealogist who had just received an alert from ancestry.com that a distant relative from some far-flung, distant continent wanted to get in touch. He began researching carcinoid tumours for much longer than

he intended. It was only the sound of the urban dawn chorus – bin men doing their weekly collection and the build-up of traffic – that alerted him to the fact that he had just disappeared down an internet wormhole of research that was eight hours deep.

I

Torquil Squire walked nimbly down New Bond Street. As nimbly as a well-preserved ninety-year-old can, that is. But there was also a sense of purpose about him that day. This wasn't conveyed solely by his determined perambulation, but also by the way he was attired. He was wearing a three-piece tweed suit, shirt and bow tie, topped off with his favourite fedora from Locks of St James's. He looked like a background artist from a period movie; something from a bygone age, which of course, at his age, he was. He'd worn this very suit sixty years before, walking down this same famous London street, heading for the exact same destination as this morning – Sotheby's. Sixty years on and the same size waist. How many people could lay claim to that? he thought. He nodded occasionally, acknowledging smiles from passing pedestrians, admiring his sartorial style. Perhaps it was the hat. He reflected how things had changed in the decades since he traipsed these streets as a book runner, particularly when it came to wearing hats. No one wore hats these days, unless you counted baseball caps, which he didn't. The wearing of a homburg or trilby often elicited curious looks nowadays. The city also smelled different. Gone, the soot and diesel fumes of the past. He missed them, even though he knew what damage they'd done to the atmosphere. Nowadays it was more like walking past a candy floss stall at an old funfair, with

raspberry, strawberry and other fruit-scented clouds swirling over the shoulders of vapers and engulfing you as you walked behind them.

But nothing was going to dampen his spirits this day. He was in a determinedly good mood. Everything seemed perfect and positive in central London that morning. Even a couple having a heated argument on a street corner just made him reflect, wistfully, on the intemperate nature of young love.

He walked into the famous white building of Sotheby's with the familiarity of an Edwardian gentleman entering his favourite London club. He checked his pocket watch, suspended by a brass chain from his waistcoat, and made his way through to the auction room. He'd registered for this morning's sale and so picked up his numbered paddle. This, despite the fact that he had no intention of buying anything and everyone knew it. He'd travelled all the way from Bristol that morning, just to keep his hand in. To make early bids and then withdraw, so as not to influence the final price. Torquil Squire was a well-known and well-liked bookseller from the south-west. The proprietor of Squire's Rare Books in Bristol, where he lived quite comfortably in the attic above the shop, in panelled rooms, like a post-war Oxford don. He joked that climbing the stairs every day was what had got him to such an ancient age.

Ed Squire, now in his mid-fifties, lived nearby in Henleaze with his wife Victoria. Ed walked down to the shop in Berkeley Square early every morning, taking him just under an hour on a good day, to have a pot of tea with his father before opening up. When he arrived on this particular morning, he called up the stairs as usual, took off his coat and hung it up. There was no

reply. His father was normally up a good couple of hours before Ed arrived. So, this was odd. Ed called up again. Still no answer. A knot of apprehension, familiar to anyone with nonagenarian parents, gripped his stomach. He ascended the stairs slowly, wondering whether the inevitable day, when he came to wake his father only to discover he'd died peacefully in his sleep, had finally arrived. But when he went into his father's bedroom, he found the bed had been neatly made and contained no paternal corpse.

The answer to his father's whereabouts was waiting for him on the kitchen table. A note in his father's glorious, Gothic, italic handwriting – always written in turquoise fountain pen – informing him that he'd gone on a day trip to London. Next to the note lay his mobile phone, unhelpfully. This meant there was no means by which Ed could get in touch with his frustratingly independent father. Today's trip could only mean one thing. He'd gone up to a sale. Ed had initially been worried by these trips, concerned that his father might go out on a limb and buy some egregiously expensive text, which he then expected his son to offload at a good profit. But as Torquil had explained to him, these trips were just a way of making him feel alive. He missed the buzz of the auction room. So revered and fondly was he thought of in the trade, he was always greeted by former colleagues with great affection, which was wonderful for his mental well-being. To his delight he would also occasionally be described to a younger bookseller as 'a legend of our trade'.

Ed made himself a cup of coffee and sat in front of his computer in the second-floor office, which looked out over the square. He didn't think it would take him long to figure out where Torquil had gone. There was normally only one sale a day

in London, with all the big houses careful not to compete with each other and thereby dilute the buying pool. Sotheby's had a sale that day. He was happy just to know where his father was.

There were some tantalising books in the Sotheby's catalogue. In Torquil's buying heyday he would've been fully occupied. Buying books at auction was a bit like gambling, to his mind. It had the same associated highs and lows, just in an auction room rather than at a racecourse, or in a bookie's. He still felt a frisson of excitement when in the presence of a rare book. It was difficult to explain, but it had never left him. Even though not really bidding, he always got there early enough to get a seat at the front. This was so he could be as close as possible to the porters as they held up that day's treasures. The highlight of this particular morning was a third folio Shakespeare – extremely rare as the majority of copies were destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666 – and he was swept away by the vertiginous ascent of the bids which culminated in an unprecedented, record-breaking price of £1.2 million.

He rounded the morning off in what was becoming something of a ritual on these London trips, a self-indulgent treat. Lunch at Sotheby's Restaurant, with a glass of claret. He sat there, at his usual corner table, with a perfect view of the entire dining room, content to watch the comings and goings of many people he knew and, increasingly, a lot he didn't. Some people came over to pay their respects. Others settled for a wave of greeting from their table. There was only one fly in the ointment. Patrick Gibb of Carnegie Books, who seemed not only surprised to see Torquil there, but not at all pleased. He paused to make sure that Torquil had seen his displeasure. Then as he went to sit

with his lunch companions, he changed seats so that he wouldn't be looking in Torquil's direction. In light of the last two years' events, this was unsurprising. Had Torquil been thirty years younger he would've gone over and punched Gibb's lights out. However, he wasn't going to let the wretched man spoil his day. The morning had been perfect in every way, he reflected. The effort of getting smartly togged up, walking to Temple Meads train station – weather permitting – and reading that day's auction catalogue on the train, filled him with a sense of purpose. With the feeling that, as ancient as he was, there were still things he could look forward to in life. There was nothing wrong in wanting to be part of a world he'd been at the centre of for over fifty years. Today's lunch had an unexpected highlight when the auctioneer came over to Torquil's table with that morning's extraordinary sale in his gloved hands, inviting the old man to have a closer look at it, before it left for the United States. He handed Torquil a pair of gloves so that he could examine the folio more closely. It was a delightful gesture by the auction house, which was both respectful and redolent of the, at times, familial nature of the book trade.

Feeling refreshed and invigorated, he decided to extend his stay in London through the afternoon. He walked over to Cecil Court, the former historic home of booksellers in London. He used to work as a runner here in the nineteen fifties. There weren't as many shops now as there used to be, and the old names had moved out, to be replaced by a new generation. But it was a nice stroll down memory lane. He walked past Goldsboro Books and turned right, up Charing Cross Road, past Any Amount of Books, one of the last surviving used bookshops on a road once world famous for them. He'd actually known Frank Doel, the head buyer of Marks & Co, whose correspondence with Helene

Hanff was later immortalised in the novel *84 Charing Cross Road*, and the film and play thereof.

He took the underground back to Paddington station and reflected on what a charmed life he'd led, doing what he'd always wanted to do. How different it could have been, had a friend not asked him to run a book from a shop in Cecil Court to Bernard Quaritch's when he was seventeen.

Ed Squire was starting to get a little worried about his father's whereabouts as the sun started to set over the west side of the square. A golden hue warmed the limestone of the buildings and a couple of windows in the building opposite reflected the waning sun in a blindingly bright, bowling ball of an orb. He phoned a fellow bookseller in London, who he knew would have been at Sotheby's that day, and was assured that his father was in fine fettle. He then called his wife Victoria and told her he'd be a little late as he was going to wait for his father to get back.

Torquil slept on the train back to Bristol after a satisfying and tiring day, ignorant of his son's concern about him and safe in the knowledge that Bristol Temple Meads was the last stop and he therefore wouldn't miss it. Then he treated himself to a taxi home. The front door hadn't been double locked, which meant that Persephone had forgotten to do it, as was her wont. The irresponsibility of youth. He'd have to talk to her about it again. But as he opened the door to the book-lined hall he felt that something was amiss. Several books were on the floor, which was unusual. He called out 'Hello?' before ascending the stairs slowly and a little fearfully.