The Private Patient

P.D. James

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dorset is notable for the history and variety of its manor houses, but travellers to that beautiful county will not find Cheverell Manor among them. The Manor and all connected with it, and the deplorable events which take place there, exist only in the imagination of the author and of her readers and have no connection with any person past or present, living or dead.

P. D. James

BOOK ONE

21 November–14 December
London, Dorset

1

On November the 21st, the day of her forty-seventh birthday, and three weeks and two days before she was murdered, Rhoda Gradwyn went to Harley Street to keep a first appointment with her plastic surgeon, and there in a consulting room designed, so it appeared, to inspire confidence and allay apprehension, made the decision which would lead inexorably to her death. Later that day she was to lunch at the Ivy. The timing of the two appointments was fortuitous. Mr Chandler-Powell had no earlier date to offer and the luncheon later with Robin Boyton, booked for twelve forty-five, had been arranged two months previously; one did not expect to get a table at the Ivy on impulse. She regarded neither appointment as a birthday celebration. This detail of her private life, like much else, was never mentioned. She doubted whether Robin had discovered her date of birth or would much care if he had. She knew herself to be a respected, even distinguished journalist, but she hardly expected her name to appear in the *Times* list of VIP birthdays.

She was due at Harley Street at eleven fifteen. Usually with a London appointment she preferred to walk at least part of the way, but today she had ordered a taxi for ten thirty. The journey from the City shouldn't take three-quarters of an hour but the London traffic was unpredictable. She was entering a world that was strange to her and had no wish to jeopardise her relationship with her surgeon by arriving late for this their first meeting.

Eight years ago she had taken a lease on a house in the City, part of a narrow terrace in a small courtyard at the end of Absolution Alley near Cheapside, and knew as soon as she moved in that this

was the part of London in which she would always choose to live. The lease was long and renewable; she would have liked to buy the house, but knew that it would never be for sale. But the fact that she couldn't hope to call it entirely her own didn't distress her. Most of it dated back to the seventeenth century. Many generations had lived in it, been born and died there, leaving behind nothing but their names on browning and archaic leases, and she was content to be in their company. Although the lower rooms with their mullioned windows were dark, those in her study and sitting room on the top storey were open to the sky, giving a view of the towers and steeples of the City and beyond. An iron staircase led from a narrow balcony on the third floor to a secluded roof, which held a row of terracotta pots and where on fine Sunday mornings she could sit with her book or newspapers as the Sabbath calm lengthened into midday and the early peace was broken only by the familiar peals of the City bells.

The City which lay below was a charnel house built on multilayered bones centuries older than those which lay beneath the cities of Hamburg or Dresden. Was this knowledge part of the mystery it held for her, a mystery felt most strongly on a bell-chimed Sunday on her solitary exploration of its hidden alleys and squares? Time had fascinated her from childhood, its apparent power to move at different speeds, the dissolution it wrought on minds and bodies, her sense that each moment, all moments past and those to come, were fused into an illusory present which with every breath became the unalterable, indestructible past. In the City of London these moments were caught and solidified in stone and brick, in churches and monuments and in bridges which spanned the grey-brown ever-flowing Thames. She would walk out in spring or summer as early as six o'clock, double locking the front door behind her, stepping into a silence more profound and mysterious than the absence of noise. Sometimes in this solitary perambulation it seemed that her own footsteps were muted, as if some part of her were afraid to waken the dead who had walked these streets and had known the same silence. She knew that on summer weekends, a few hundred yards away, the tourists and

crowds would soon be pouring over the Millennium Bridge, the laden river steamers would move with majestic clumsiness from their berths, and the public city would become raucously alive.

But none of this business penetrated Sanctuary Court. The house she had chosen could not have been more different from that curtained, claustrophobic semi-detached suburban villa in Laburnum Grove, Silford Green, the east London suburb where she had been born and in which she had spent the first sixteen years of her life. Now she would take the first step on a path which might reconcile her to those years or, if reconciliation were impossible, at least rob them of their destructive power.

It was now eight thirty and she was in her bathroom. Turning off the shower, she moved, towel-wrapped, to the mirror over the washbasin. She put out her hand and smoothed it over the steam-smeared glass and watched her face appear, pale and anonymous as a smudged painting. It was months since she had deliberately touched the scar. Now, slowly and delicately, she ran a fingertip down its length, feeling the silver shininess at its heart, the hard bumpy outline of its edge. Placing her left hand over her cheek, she tried to imagine the stranger who, in a few weeks' time, would look into the same mirror and see a doppelgänger of herself, but one incomplete, unmarked, perhaps with only a thin white line to show where this puckered crevice had run. Gazing at the image which seemed no more than a faint palimpsest of her former self, she began slowly and deliberately to demolish her carefully constructed defences and let the turbulent past, first like a swelling stream and then a river in spate, break through unresisted and take possession of her mind.