The Remorseful Day

Colin Dexter

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PAN BOOKS



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Prolegomenon

As o'er me now thou lean'st thy breast,
With launder'd bodice crisply pressed,
Lief I'd prolong my grievous ill –
Wert thou my guardian angel still
(Edmund Raikes, 1537–65,
The Nurse)

'So I OFTEN hook my foot over the side of the mattress.'

'You *what*?'

'Sort of anchors me to my side of the bed.'

'Double bed?'

'Not unknown is it, for a married couple? People can share the same bed but not the same thoughts – old Chinese saying.'

'Still makes me jealous.'

'Idiot!'

'Everybody gets a bit jealous sometimes.'

'Not everybody.'

'Not you, nurse?'

'I've just learned not to show it, that's all. And it's none of your business in any case.'

'Sorry.'

'How I hate men who say "sorry"!'

'I promise not to say it again, miss.'

'And will you promise me something else? To

be a bit more honest with yourself – and with me?'

'Scout's honour!'

'I can't believe you were ever in the Scouts.'

'Well, no, but . . .'

'Shall I test you?'

'Test me?'

'Would you like me to jump into bed with you *now*?'

'Yes!'

'You're quick on the buzzer.'

'Next question?'

'Do you think *I'd* like to jump into bed with *you*?'

'I'd like to think so.'

'What about the other patients?'

'You could draw the curtains.'

'What excuse . . . ?'

'You could always take my blood pressure.'

'*Again?*'

'Why not?'

'We know all about your blood pressure. High – very high – especially when I'm around.'

'It's those black stockings of yours.'

'You're a stocking-tops man!'

'Nice word, isn't it – stocking-tops?'

'If only you weren't stuck in this bloody ward!'

'I can always discharge myself.'

'Not a wise move, good sir – not in your case.'

'What time are you off duty?'

'Half-eight.'

'What'll you do then?'

'Off home. I'm expecting a phone call.'

'You're trying to make me jealous again.'

'After that, I suppose I'll just poke the thingummy, you know, around the four channels.'

'Five, now.'

'We don't get the new one.'

'What about Sky?'

'In *our* village, satellite dishes are most *definitely* discouraged.'

'You could always take a video home.'

'No need. We've got lots of videos. You should see some of them – you know, the sex ones.'

'You watch that sort of thing?'

'When I'm in the mood.'

'When's that?'

'Most of the time.'

'And even if you aren't in the mood?'

'Oh yes! They soon turn anybody on. Haven't you seen some of these Amsterdam videos? All sorts of bizarre things they get up to.'

'I haven't seen them, no.'

'Would you like to?'

'I'm not quite sure I would, no.'

'Not even if you watched them with me?'

'Please, nurse, am I allowed to change my mind?'

'We could arrange a joint viewing.'

'How – how bizarre's bizarre?'

'Well, in one of 'em there's this woman – about my age – lovely figure – wrists tied to the top of the four-poster bed – ankles tied to the bottom . . .'

'Go on.'

'Well, there's these two young studs – one black, one white – '

'No racial discrimination, then?'

' – and they just take turns, you know.'

'Raping her . . .'

'You're so *naive*, aren't you? She wouldn't have *been* in the bloody video, would she, if she didn't want to be? There *are* some people like her, you know. The only real sexual thrill they get is from some sort of submission – you know, that sort of thing.'

'Odd sort of women!'

'Odd? Unusual, perhaps, but . . .'

'How come you know so much about this?'

'When we were in Amsterdam, they invited me to do some porno-filming. Frank didn't mind. They made a pretty good offer.'

'So you negotiated a fee?'

'Hold on! I only said this particular woman was *about* my age – '

' – and had a lovely figure.'

'Would you like to see if it *was* me?'

'One condition.'

'What's that?'

'If I come, you mustn't hook your foot over the side of the mattress.'

'Not much danger of that.'

'Stay with me a bit longer!'

'No. You're not my only patient, and some of these poor devils'll be here long after *you've* gone.'

'Will you come and give me a chaste little kiss before you go off duty?'

'No. I'm shooting straight back to Lower Swinstead. I told you: I'm expecting a phone call.'

'From . . . your husband?'

'You must be kidding! Frank's in Switzerland for a few days. He's far too mean to call me from there – even on the cheap rates.'

'Another man in your life?'

'Jesus! You don't take me for a dyke, do you?'

'You're an amazing girl.'

'Girl? I'll be forty-eight this Thursday.'

'Can I take you out? Make a birthday fuss of you?'

'No chance. According to your notes, you're going to be in at least till the end of the week.'

'You know, in a way, I wish I *could* stay in. Indefinitely.'

'Well, I promise one thing: as soon as you're out, I'll be in touch.'

'Please! If you can.'

'And you'll come and see me?'

'If you invite me.'

'I'm inviting you now.'

Chapter One

You holy Art, when all my hope is shaken,
And through life's raging tempest I am drawn,
You make my heart with warmest love to waken,
As if into a better world reborn
(From *An Die Musik*, translated by Basil Swift)

Apart (of course) from Wagner, apart from Mozart's compositions for the clarinet, Schubert was one of the select composers who could occasionally transport him to the frontier of tears. And it was Schubert's turn in the early evening of Wednesday, 15 July 1998, when – *The Archers* over – a bedroom-slippered Chief Inspector Morse was to be found in his North Oxford bachelor flat, sitting at his ease in Zion and listening to a Lieder recital on Radio 3, an amply filled tumbler of pale Glenfiddich beside him. And why not? He was on a few days' furlough that had so far proved quite unexpectedly pleasurable.

Morse had never enrolled in the itchy-footed regiment of truly adventurous souls, feeling (as he did) little temptation to explore the remoter corners even of his native land; and this, principally, because he could now imagine few if any places closer to his heart than Oxford – the city which, though not his natural mother, had for so many years performed the duties

of a loving foster-parent. As for foreign travel, long faded were his boyhood dreams that roamed the sands round Samarkand; and a lifelong pterophobia still precluded any airline bookings to Bayreuth, Salzburg, Vienna – the trio of cities he sometimes thought he ought to see.

Vienna . . .

The city Schubert had so rarely left; the city in which he'd gained so little recognition; where he'd died of typhoid fever – only thirty-one.

Not much of an innings, was it – thirty-one?

Morse leaned back, listened, and looked semi-contentedly through the french window. In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Oscar Wilde had spoken of that little tent of blue that prisoners call the sky; and Morse now contemplated that little tent of green that owners of North Oxford flats are wont to call the garden. Flowers had always meant something to Morse, even from his schooldays. Yet in truth it was more the nomenclature of the several species, and their context in the works of the great poets, that had compelled his imagination: fast-fading violets, the globèd peonies, the fields of asphodel . . . Indeed Morse was fully aware of the etymology and the mythological associations of the asphodel, although quite certainly he would never have recognized one of its kind had it flashed across a Technicolor screen.

It was still true though: as men grew older (so Morse told himself) the delights of the natural world grew ever more important. Not just the flowers, either. What about the birds?

Morse had reached the conclusion that if he were to be reincarnated (a prospect which seemed to him most blessedly remote) he would register as a part-time Quaker, and devote a sizeable quota of his leisure hours to ornithology. This latter decision was consequent upon his realization, however late in the day, that life would be significantly impoverished should the birds no longer sing. And it was for this reason that, the previous week, he had taken out a year's subscription to *Birdwatching*; taken out a copy of the RSPB's *Birdwatchers' Guide* from the Summertown Library; and purchased a second-hand pair of 8/50mm binoculars (£9.90) that he'd spotted in the window of the Oxfam Shop just down the Banbury Road. And to complete his programme he had called in at the Summertown Pet Store and taken home a small wired cylinder packed with peanuts – a cylinder now suspended from a branch overhanging his garden. From *the* branch overhanging his garden.

He reached for the binoculars now and focused on an interesting specimen pecking away at the grass below the peanuts: a small bird, with a greyish crown, dark-brown bars across the dingy russet of its back, and paler underparts. As he watched, he sought earnestly to memorize this remarkable bird's characteristics, so as to be able to match its variegated plumage against the appropriate illustration in the *Guide*.

Plenty of time for that though.

He leaned back once more and rejoiced in the radiant warmth of Schwarzkopf's voice, following the

English text that lay open on his lap: 'You holy Art, when all my hope is shaken . . .'

When, too, a few moments later, his mood of pleasurable melancholy was shaken by three confident bursts on a front-door bell that to several of his neighbours sounded considerably over-decibelled, even for the hard-of-hearing.

Chapter Two

> When Napoleon's eagle eye flashed down the list of officers proposed for promotion, he was wont to scribble in the margin against any particular name: 'Is he *lucky*, though?'
>
> (Felix Kirkmarkham, *The Genius of Napoleon*)

'Not disturbing you?'

Morse made no direct reply, but his resigned look would have been sufficiently eloquent for most people.

Most people.

He opened the door widely – perforce needed so to do – in order to accommodate his unexpected visitor within the comparatively narrow entrance.

'I *am* disturbing you.'

'No, no! It's just that . . .'

'Look, matey!' (Chief Superintendent Strange cocked an ear towards the lounge.) 'I don't give a dam if I'm disturbing *you*; pity about disturbing old Schubert, though.'

For the dozenth time in their acquaintance, Morse found himself quietly re-appraising the man who first beached and then readjusted his vast bulk in an armchair, with a series of expiratory grunts.

Morse had long known better than to ask Strange whether he wanted a drink, alcoholic or non-alcoholic.

If Strange wanted a drink, of either variety, he would ask for it, immediately and unambiguously. But Morse did allow himself one question:

'You know you just said you didn't give a dam. Do you know how you spell "dam"?'

'You spell it "d – a – m". Tiny Indian coin – that's what a dam is. Surely you knew that?'

For the thirteenth time in their acquaintance . . .

'Is that a single malt you're drinking there, Morse?'

It was only after Morse had filled, then refilled, his visitor's glass that Strange came to the point of his evening call.

'The papers – even the tabloids – have been doing me proud. You read *The Times* yesterday?'

'I never read *The Times*.'

'What? The bloody paper's there – there! – on the coffee table.'

'Just for the Crossword – and the Letters page.'

'You don't read the obituaries?'

'Well, perhaps just a glance sometimes.'

'To see if you're there?'

'To see if some of them are younger than me.'

'I don't follow you.'

'If they *are* younger, so a statistician once told me, I've got a slightly better chance of living on beyond the norm.'

'Mm.' Strange nodded vaguely. 'You frightened of death?'

'A bit.'

Strange suddenly picked up his second half-full

tumbler of Scotch and tossed it back at a draught like a visitor downing an initiatory vodka at the Russian Embassy.

'What about the telly, Morse? Did you watch *Newsroom South-East* last night?'

'I've got a TV – video as well. But I don't seem to get round to watching anything and I can't work the video very well.'

'Really? And how do you expect to understand what's going on in the great big world out there? You're supposed to *know* what's going on. You're a police officer, Morse!'

'I listen to the wireless—'

'*Wireless?* Where've you got to in life, matey? "Radio" – that's what they've been calling it these last thirty years.'

It was Morse's turn to nod vaguely as Strange continued:

'Good job I got *this* done for you, then.'

Sorry, sir. Perhaps I am a bit behind the times – as well as *The Times*.

But Morse gave no voice to these latter thoughts as he slowly read the photocopied article that Strange had handed to him.

Morse always read slowly.

MURDER POLICE SEEK ANONYMOUS CALLER

A MAN HAS rung the police anonymously with information that could help identify the killer of Mrs Yvonne Harrison who was found handcuffed and battered to death a year ago.

Detectives yesterday appealed for the caller to make contact again. No clear motive has ever been established for the murder of the 48-year-old nurse who was alone in her home in the Oxfordshire village of Lower Swinstead when her killer broke in through a ground-floor window.

Detective Chief Superintendent Strange of Thames Valley CID said that a man had rung twice: "We are very anxious to hear from this caller again as soon as possible. He can contact us in the strictest confidence. We don't believe the calls are a hoax and we don't believe the caller himself is the killer. But we think that he can give us more information to substantially further our enquiries into this brutal murder."

At the time of the murder Mrs Harrison's husband Frank was in London where he works for the Swiss Helvetia Bank. Their son Simon works at the Daedalus Press in Oxford; their daughter Sarah is a junior consultant in the Diabetes Centre at the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford.

Had Morse's eyes narrowed slightly as he read the last few lines? If they had, he made no reference to whatever might have puzzled or interested him there.

'I trust it wasn't you who split the infinitive, sir?'

'You never suspected that, surely? We're all used to sloppy reporting, aren't we?'

Morse nodded as he handed back the photocopied article.

'No! Keep it, Morse – I've got the original.'

'Very kind of you, sir, but . . .'

'But it interested you, perhaps?'

'Only the bit at the end, about the Radcliffe.'

'Why's that?'

'Well, as you know, I was in there myself – after I was diagnosed.'

'Christ! You make it sound as if you're the only one who's ever been bloody diagnosed!'

Morse held his peace, for his memory needed no jogging: Strange himself had been a patient in the self-same Radcliffe Infirmary a year or so before his own hospitalization. No one had known much about Strange's troubles. There had been hushed rumours about 'endocrinological dysfunction'; but not everyone at Police HQ was happy about spelling or pronouncing or identifying such a polysyllabic ailment.

'You know why I brought that cutting, Morse?'

'No! And to be honest with you, I don't much care. I'm on furlough, you know that. The quack tells me I'm run down – blood sugar far too high – blood pressure far too high. Says I need to have a quiet little rest-cure and try to forget the great big world out there, as you call it.'

'Some of us can't forget it though, can we?' Strange spoke the words very softly, and Morse got to his feet and turned off the CD player.

'Not one of your greatest triumphs that case, was it?'

'One of the few – very few, Morse – I got no-bloody-where with. And it wasn't exactly mine, either, as you know. But it was my responsibility, that's all. Still is.'

'What's all this got to do with me?'

Strange further expanded his Gargantuan girth as he further expounded:

'I thought, you know, with the wife . . . and all that . . . I thought it'd help to stay in the Force another year. But . . .'

Morse nodded sympathetically. Strange's wife had died very suddenly a year previously, victim of a coronary thrombosis which should surely never have afflicted one so slim, so cautious, so physically fit. She'd been an unlovely woman, Mrs Strange – outwardly timid and inwardly bullying; yet a woman to whom by all accounts Strange had been deeply attached. Friends had spoken of a 'tight' marriage; and most agreed that the widower would have been wholly lost on his own, at least for some while, had he jacked things in (as he'd intended) the previous September. And in the end he'd been persuaded to reconsider his position – and to continue for a further year. But he'd been uneasy back at HQ: a sort of supernumerary Super, feeling like a retired schoolmaster returning to a Common Room. A mistake. Morse knew it. Strange knew it.

'I still don't see what it's got to do with me, sir.'

'I want the case re-opened – not that it's ever been closed, of course. It worries me, you see. We should have got further than we did.'

'I still—'

'I'd like you to look at the case again. If anyone can crack it, *you* can. Know why? Because you're just plain bloody lucky, Morse, that's why! *And I want this case solved.*'