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The Woodcutter

Written by Reginald Hill

Published by Harper

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REGINALD HILL

The Woodcutter

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For John Lennard

a poet among critics
a true friend to writers
and a fountain of knowledge
who by imagining what he knows
helps us to know what we imagine

*'Insensé, dit-il, le jour où j'avais résolu de me venger, de ne pas m'être arraché le coeur!'**

Alexander Dumas: *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*

*'I must have been mad,' he said, 'the day I started planning revenge, not to have ripped my heart out!'

PROLOGUE

necessity

I am sworn brother, sweet,
To grim Necessity, and he and I
Will keep a league till death.

Shakespeare: *Richard II* (v.i)

1

Summer 1963; Profumo disgraced; Ward dead; The Beatles' *Please please me* top album; Luther King having his dream; JFK fast approaching the end of his; the Cold War at its chilliest; the Wind of Change blowing ever more strongly through Colonial Africa, with its rising blasts already being felt across the Gate of Tears in British-controlled Aden.

But the threat of terrorist activity is not yet so great that an eleven-year-old English boy cannot enjoy his summer holiday there before returning to school.

There are restrictions, however. His diplomat father, aware of the growing threat from the National Liberation Front, no longer lets him roam free, but sets strict boundaries and insists he is always accompanied by Ahmed, a young Yemeni gardener cum handyman who has become very attached to the boy.

In Ahmed's company he feels perfectly safe, so when a scarred and dusty Morris Oxford pulls up alongside them with its rear door invitingly open, he feels surprise but no alarm as his friend urges him inside.

There are already two people on the back seat. The boy finds himself crushed not too comfortably between Ahmed

and a stout bald man who smells of sweat and cheap tobacco.

The car roars away. Soon they reach one of the boundaries laid down by his father. The boy looks at Ahmed queryingly, but already they are moving into one of the less salubrious areas of the city.

Oddly this isn't his first visit. The previous year, in safer times, having overheard one of the British clerks refer smirkingly to its main thoroughfare as *The Street of a Thousand Arseholes*, he had persuaded Ahmed to bring him here. The street in question had been something of a disappointment, offering the boy little clue as to the origin of its entertaining name. Ahmed had responded to his questioning by saying with a grin, 'Too young. Later maybe, when you are older!'

Now the Morris turns into this very street, slows down, and almost before it has come to a halt the boy finds himself bundled out by the bald man and pushed through a doorway.

But he is not yet so frightened that he does not observe the number 19 painted on the wall beside the door.

He is almost carried up some stairs and taken into a room empty of furniture but full of men. Here he is dumped on the floor in a corner. He tries to speak to Ahmed. The young man shakes his head impatiently, and after that will not meet his gaze.

After ten minutes or so a new man arrives, this one wearing a European suit and exuding authority. The others fall silent.

The newcomer stands over the boy and stoops to peer into his face.

'So, boy,' he says. 'You are the son of the British spymaster.'

'No, sir,' he replies. 'My father is the British commercial attaché.'

The man laughs.

'When I was your age, I knew what my father was,' he

says. 'Come, let us speak to him and see how much he values you.'

He is dragged to his feet by the bald man and marched into another room where there is a telephone.

The man in the suit dials a number, the boy hears him speak his father's name, there is a pause, then the man says, 'Say nothing. I speak for the Front for the Liberation of South Yemen. We have your son. He will speak to you so that you know I do not lie.'

He makes a gesture and the boy is forced forward.

The man says, 'Speak to your father so he may know it is you,' and puts the phone to the boy's mouth.

The boy chants, '*Mille ani undeviginti*.'

The man snatches the phone away and grabs the boy by the throat.

'What did you say?' he screams.

'You said he had to know it was me,' gabbles the boy. 'It's a song we sing together about Paddy McGinty's Goat. Ask him, he'll tell you.'

The man speaks into the phone: 'What is this Ginty goat?'

Whatever is said to him seems to satisfy him and, at a nod from the man, the boy is dragged back to the first room.

Here he lies in the corner, ignored. Men come and go. There is an atmosphere of excitement as though everything is going well. Ahmed, who receives many congratulatory slaps and embraces, still refuses to look at him. He grows increasingly fearful and sinks towards despair.

Then from below comes a sudden outburst of noise.

First the splintering of wood as though a locked door is being broken down, then a tumult of upraised voices followed almost instantly by the rattle of small-arms fire.

All the men rush out. Left alone, the boy looks for a place to hide but there is nowhere. The room's one window is too small for even a small eleven-year-old to wriggle through.

The din is getting louder, nearer. The door bursts open. The bald man rushes in with a pistol in his hand. The boy falls to the floor. The man screams something unintelligible and aims the weapon. Before he can fire, Ahmed comes in behind and jumps on his back. The gun goes off. The bullet hits the floor between the boy's splayed legs.

The two men wrestle briefly. The gun explodes again.

And the bald man slumps against the wall, his hands holding his stomach. Blood seeps through his fingers.

Ahmed stands over him, clutching the pistol. Now at last his eyes meet the boy's and he tries to smile, but it doesn't quite work. Then he turns to the door that has been slammed shut in the struggle.

The boy cries, 'Ahmed, wait!'

But the young Yemeni is already opening the door.

He hardly takes one pace over the threshold before he is driven back into the room by a hail of bullets that shatter his chest.

Their eyes meet once more as he lies on the floor. This time the smile makes it to his lips. Then he dies.

Folded in his father's arms, the boy finally lets himself cry.

His father says, 'You did well, you kept your head; the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, eh? And didn't I tell you that doing your Latin homework would come in useful some day!'

Two years later his father will be killed when his car is blown up by a FLOSY bomb, so the boy never has the chance to sit down with him as an adult and ask what the subversives wanted him to do as the price of his son's safety.

Nor what his answer would have been if his own young wits had not been quick enough to reveal the street and the building number where he was being held.

But before he went back to school he did ask how it was

that his friend Ahmed, who had loved him enough to save his life and give up his own in the process, could have put him in that perilous position in the first place.

And his father had answered, 'When love is in opposition to grim necessity, there is usually only one winner.'

He had not understood then what he meant. But he was to understand later.

2

Autumn 1989; the world in turmoil; the Berlin Wall crumbling; Chris Rea's *The Road to Hell* top album; Western civilization watching with bated breath the chain of events that will lead to the freeing of Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War.

In a Cumbrian forest in a glade dappled by the midday sun, a man sits slumped against a twisted rowan, his weathered face more deeply scored by the thoughts grinding through his bowed head, his eyes fixed upon but not seeing the unopened flask and sandwich box between his feet. A little way apart, a second man stands and watches, his long brown hair edged wolf-grey, his troubled face full of a compassion he knows it is vain to express, while at his back a young girl too regards the sitting man with unblinking gaze, though her expression is much harder to read. And over the wide woodland tract, so rarely free of the wind's soughing music above, and the pizzicato of cracking twigs below, a silence falls as if trees and sky and surrounding mountains too were bating their breath for fear of intruding on grief.

Three hundred miles to the south in an East London multi-storey car park, five hoodies who probably wouldn't bate a

breath if Jesus Christ crash-landed on St Paul's in a chariot of fire are breaking into a car.

But they've done it once too often, and suddenly cops spring up all around as if someone had been sowing dragon's teeth. The hoodies scatter and run, only to find there's no place to run to.

Except for one. He heads for a ten-foot concrete wall with a one-foot gap at the top. To the cops' amazement, he goes up the wall like a lizard. Then, to their horror, he rolls through the gap and vanishes.

They are on the fifth level and there's nothing beyond that gap but a sixty-foot drop to the street below.

The cops radio down to ask their waiting colleagues to go round the back of the multi-storey and pick up the corpse.

A few minutes later word comes back – no corpse at the foot of the wall, just a young hoodie who tried to run off as soon as he spotted them.

At the station he tells them he is John Smith, age eighteen, no fixed abode.

After that he shuts up and stays shut up.

They print him. He's not in the records.

His fellow hoodies claim never to have seen him before. They also claim never to have seen each other before. One of them is so doped up he's uncertain whether he's ever seen himself before.

Two are clearly juveniles. A social worker is summoned to sit in on their questioning. The other two have police records. One is eighteen, the other nineteen. The duty solicitor deals with them.

John Smith's age they're still not sure about, and something about the youth, some intangible aura of likeability, makes them share their doubts with the duty solicitor.

He starts his interview by pointing out to Smith that as a juvenile he would be dealt with differently, probably getting

a light, non-custodial sentence. Smith sticks to his story, refusing to add details about his background though his accent is clearly northern.

The solicitor guesses he's lying about his age and name to keep his family out of the picture. Hoping to scare the boy into honesty by over-egging the adult consequences of his crime, he turns his attention to the case against him and quickly perceives it isn't all that strong. Identification via the grainy CCTV tape in the dimly lit multi-storey is a long way this side of reasonable doubt. And could anyone really have shinned down the sheer outer wall in under a minute as the police evidence claims?

As they talk, the boy relaxes as long as no questions are asked about his origins, and the solicitor finds himself warming to his young client. On his way home he diverts to take a photo of the outer wall of the multi-storey to show just how sheer it is. Next day he shows it to the boy, who is clearly touched by this sign of concern, but becomes panicky when told he has to appear before a magistrate that same morning. The solicitor assures him this is just a committal hearing, not a trial, but warns him that as he is officially an adult of no fixed abode, he will almost certainly be remanded in custody.

This is what happens. As the boy is led away, the solicitor tells him not to worry, he will call round at the Remand Centre later in the day. But he has other work to deal with that keeps him busy well into the evening. He remembers the boy as he makes his way home and eases his guilt with the thought that a night in a Remand Centre without sight of a friendly face might be just the thing Smith needs to make him see sense.

He talks to his wife about the boy. She regards him with surprise. He is not in the habit of getting attached to the low-life criminals who form his customary clientele.

He goes to bed early, exhausted. In the small hours when

his wife awakens him, whispering she thinks someone is trying to break in through the living-room window, he reckons she must be having a nightmare as their flat is on the tenth floor of a high rise.

But when they go into the living room and switch on the light, there perched on the narrow window box outside the window is the figure of a man.

Not a man. A boy. John Smith.

The solicitor tells his wife it's OK, opens the window and lets Smith in.

You said you would come, says the boy, half tearfully, half accusingly.

How did you get out of the Centre? asks the solicitor. *And how did you find me?*

Through a window, says the boy. *And your office address was on that card you gave me, so I got in through a skylight and rooted around till I found your home address. I tidied up after, I didn't leave a mess.*

His wife, who has been listening to this exchange with interest, lowers the bread knife she is carrying and says, *I'll make a cup of tea.*

She returns with a pot of tea and a large sponge cake which Smith demolishes over the next hour. During this time she gets more out of the boy than the combined efforts of her husband and the police managed in two days.

When she's satisfied she's got all she can, she says, *Now we'd better get you back.*

The boy looks alarmed and she reassures him, *My husband's going to get you off this charge, no problem. But absconding from custody's another matter, so you need to be back in the Remand Centre before reveille.*

We can't just knock at the door, protests her husband.

Of course not. You'll get back in the way you came out, won't you, ducks?

The boy nods, and half an hour later the couple sit in their car distantly watching a shadow running up the outer wall of the Remand Centre.

Nice lad, says the wife. *You always did have good judgment. When you get him off you'd better bring him back home till we decide what to do with him.*

Home! exclaims the solicitor. *Our home?*

Who else's?

Look, I like the lad, but I wasn't planning to adopt him!

Me neither, says his wife. *But we've got to do something with him. Otherwise what does he do? Goes back to thieving, or ends up flogging his arsehole round King's Cross.*

So when the case is dismissed, Smith takes possession of the solicitor's spare room.

But not for long.

The wife says, *I've mentioned him at the Chapel. JC says he'd like to meet him.*

The solicitor pulls a face and says, *King's Cross might be a better bet.*

The wife says, *No, you're wrong. None of that with a kid he takes under his wing. In any case, the boy needs a job and who else can we talk to?*

The meeting takes place in a pub after the lunchtime crush has thinned out. To start with the boy doesn't say much, but under the influence of a couple of halves of lager and the man, JC's, relaxed undemanding manner he becomes quite voluble. Voluble enough to make it clear he's not too big on hymn-singing, collection-box rattling or any of the other activities conjured up in his mind by references to the Chapel.

The man says, *I expect you'd prefer something more active and out of doors, eh? So tell me, apart from running up and down vertical walls, what else is it that you do?*

The boy thinks, then replies, *I can chop down trees.*

JC laughs.

A woodcutter! Well, curiously at the Chapel we do have an extensive garden to tend and occasionally a nimble woodcutter might come in handy. I'll see what I can do.

The boy and the woman look at each other and exchange smiles.

And the man, JC, looks on and smiles benevolently too.

3

Winter 1991; Terry Waite freed; 264 Croats massacred at Vukovar; Freddy Mercury dies of AIDS; Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* top album; the Soviet Union dissolved; Gorbachev resigns.

And in a quiet side street in the 20th arrondissement of Paris, a man with a saintly smile relaxes in the comfortable rear seat of a Citroën CX. Through the swirling mist above the trees on the far side of a small park he can just make out the top three storeys of a six-storey apartment block. He imagines he sees a shadow moving rapidly down the side of the building, but it is soon out of sight, and in any case he is long used to the deceptions of the imagination on such a night as this. He returns his attention to Quintus Curtius's account of the fall of Tyre, and is soon so immersed that he is taken by surprise a few minutes later when the car door opens and the boy slips inside.

'Oh hello,' he says, closing the book. 'Everything all right?'

'Piece of cake,' says the boy. 'Bit chilly on the fingers though.'

'You ought to wear gloves,' says the man, passing over a thermos flask.

‘Can’t feel the holds the same with gloves,’ replies the boy, drinking directly from the flask.

The man regards him fondly and says, ‘You’re a good little woodcutter.’

In the front of the car a phone rings. The driver answers it, speaking in French. After a while, he turns and says, ‘He’s on his way, JC. But there’s a problem. He diverted to the Gare d’Est. He picked up a woman and a child. They think it’s his wife and daughter. They’re in the car with him.’

Without any change of expression or tone the man says softly, ‘*Parles Français, idiot!*’

But his warning is too late.

The boy says, ‘What’s that about a wife and daughter? You said he lived by himself.’

‘So he does,’ reassures the man. ‘As you doubtless observed, it’s a very small flat. Also he’s estranged from his family. If it is his wife and daughter, and that’s not definite, he is almost certainly taking them to a hotel. Would you like something to eat? I have some chocolate.’

The boy shakes his head and drinks again from the flask. His face is troubled.

The man says quietly, ‘This is a very wicked person, I mean wicked in himself as well as a dangerous enemy of our country.’

The boy says, ‘Yeah, I know that, you explained that. But that doesn’t mean his wife and kid are wicked, does it?’

‘Of course it doesn’t. And we do everything in our power not to hurt the innocent; I explained that too, didn’t I?’

‘Yes,’ agrees the boy.

‘Well then.’

They sit in silence for some minutes. The phone sounds again.

The driver answers, listens, turns his head and says, ‘*Ils sont arrivés. La femme et l’enfant aussi. Il demande, que voudrais-vous?*’

The man said, '*Dites-lui, vas'y.*'

The boy's face is screwed up as if by sheer concentration he can make sense of what's being said. On the far side of the park the mist above the trees clears for a moment and the apartment block is visible silhouetted against a brightly starred sky.

A light comes on in one of the uppermost chambers. At first it is an ordinary light, amber against an uncurtained window.

And then it turns red. It is too distant for any sound to reach inside the well-insulated car, but in that moment they see the glass dissolve and smoke and debris come streaming towards them like the fingers of a reaching hand.

Then the mist swirls back and the man says, 'Go.'

Back in their apartment, the boy goes to his room and the man sits by a gently hissing gas fire, encoding his report. When it is finished, he pours himself a drink and opens his *History of Alexander the Great.*

Suddenly the door opens and the boy, naked except for his brief underpants, bursts into the room.

He says in a voice so choked with emotion he can hardly get the words out, 'You lied to me, you fucking bastard! They were still with him, both of them, it's on the news, it's so fucking terrible it's on the British news. You lied! Why?'

The man says, 'It had to be done tonight. Tomorrow would have been too late.'

The boy comes nearer. The man is very aware of the young muscular body so close he can feel the heat off it.

The boy says, 'Why did you make me do it? You said you'd never ask me to do anything I didn't want to do. But you tricked me. Why?'

The man for once is not smiling. He says quietly, 'My father once said to me, when love and grim necessity meet, there is only one winner. You probably don't understand

that now any more than I did then. But you will. In the meantime all I can say is I'm very sorry. I'll find a way to make it up to you, I promise.'

'How? How can you possibly make it up to me?' screams the boy. 'You've made me a murderer. What can you do that can ever make up for that! There's nothing! Nothing!'

And the man says, rather sadly, like one who pronounces a sentence rather than makes a gift, 'I shall give you your heart's desire.'