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Call the Dying

Andrew Taylor

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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Chapter One

The past is a foreign country, thought Jill Francis: and I want an exit visa.

She drove over New Bridge and slowed for the level-crossing before the station. The car juddered across the railway tracks and began to crawl up the long hill towards the crossroads at the top of the town. The buildings she passed had the unsettling familiarity of the half-remembered, of a dream landscape revisited.

Behind her, a driver hooted his horn. No point in dawdling. She put her foot down hard on the accelerator and the Morris Minor jerked forward. At the crossroads she turned left into the High Street. So here she was, against her better judgement, back in Lydmouth, at least for the time being: so the sooner she became used to it the better.

The town was smaller and drabber than she remembered. It was only mid-afternoon but thanks to the fog the streets were wrapped in a moist grey twilight. The lights were on in the shops. People hurried along the pavements, anxious to be home. A thickset man in overalls and flat cap was standing on the pavement outside the Gardenia Café. He stared blankly at Jill's jaunty green car and spat in the road.

Nothing personal, Jill told herself; he probably wasn't even aware he was staring at me. Still, it seemed an unhappy omen. She turned left at the war memorial and followed a broad avenue lined with leafless trees and sturdy Victorian villas.

The road came to a T-junction where a gap in the trees and the houses gave her a glimpse of the grey river below. She turned left and a moment later was pulling up outside Troy House.

A curtain twitched in the big bay window of the drawing-room. The front door opened and Charlotte came down the steps, a little unsteadily, hand on the balustrade. Like everyone and everything else, she had become less substantial in the fog and smaller than she was in memory. She had lost weight since September.

'Jill, dear. How lovely to see you – and so early, too. I wasn't expecting you for at least another hour.' There was an unmistakable note of complaint in Charlotte's voice. 'You must be exhausted. Come and sit down.'

Jill followed Charlotte inside.

'Dr Leddon is here,' said Charlotte brightly. 'Have you met him?'

'No, I haven't.'

'He's up with Philip now.' Charlotte lowered her voice. 'Fortunately Philip likes him. It makes things so much easier. He always had his doubts about old Bayswater. But Dr Leddon is thoroughly modern and very nice to deal with, too.'

The hall smelled musty, as though it had not been properly aired for some time. The dark oak chest near the front door was cloudy with lack of polishing. The Wemyss-Browns' housekeeper had retired a couple of years before and Charlotte had not been able to find a replacement for love or money.

She led Jill into the kitchen, which was at the back of the house, overlooking the service yard. The room was much warmer than the hall. A kettle steamed on the hotplate of the Aga. Jill took off her coat – Charlotte had forgotten to take it in the hall – and laid it across one of the chairs. While Charlotte made the tea, Jill sat down and took cigarettes from a handbag.

'You really should cut down,' Charlotte said over her shoulder, though without her usual conviction. 'Everyone says they're frightfully bad for you.'

'They always say that about something pleasant,' Jill said. 'And then six months later it changes, and something that was meant to be good for you has now become bad for you, and vice versa.'

'That's one thing this ghastly business has done for Philip,' Charlotte said, pursuing a line of her own. 'He hasn't had a cigarette since it happened. I was really getting quite worried about him. He's not meant to drink either, but I sometimes allow him a little glass of claret as a treat.'

Jill closed her eyes momentarily, for the idea of Philip not smoking and hardly drinking was akin to the idea of a fish not swimming. 'How is he?'

Charlotte shrugged and turned away, her body hunched over the teapot into which she was spooning tea. 'Getting better, of course, but it's a slow process. His legs are frightfully swollen and he gets breathless very easily. Dr Leddon is very concerned that he shouldn't get worried or excited.' She glanced at Jill. 'Which is why it's such a blessing that you are here.'

There were footsteps in the hall and the kitchen door opened.

'Oh – hello, Doctor,' said Charlotte in a voice that was suddenly uncertain. 'How is he today?'

'Not too bad.' Leddon was at least half a head taller than Jill and perhaps a year or two younger. 'Very sleepy but quite comfortable.'

'They say rest is the best medicine, don't they?'

'They do indeed.' Leddon glanced at Jill. He was dark, with vivid blue eyes and the sort of eyelashes that many women would pay good money for.

Charlotte said, stumbling a little over the words: 'Jill, this is Dr Leddon, who's taken over Dr Bayswater's practice. And this is an old friend of ours – Jill Francis.'

The doctor held out a hand. 'Roger Leddon.' There was a minute hesitation, a practised glance at Jill's left hand. 'How do you do, Miss Francis?'

'Jill's going to look after the *Gazette* while Philip's convalescing,' Charlotte said. 'Now what about some tea?'

'Not for me, thank you. I must get on.' Leddon was still looking at Jill. 'So you're a journalist?'

'Yes – I used to work on the *Gazette* but I moved to London a few years ago.'

'You and Dr Leddon are going to be neighbours,' Charlotte said.

'Really?' Leddon smiled at Jill. 'You've taken that second-floor flat at Raglan Court?'

'For the time being.'

'That's what I told myself when I moved in last year,' Leddon said. He turned to Charlotte. 'I must be off but I'll look in tomorrow. No – don't worry – I know the way. I'll see myself out. Nice to meet you, Miss Francis.'

The two women listened to his footsteps receding down the hallway. Neither of them spoke until the heavy front door had closed behind him.

'Charming, isn't he?' Charlotte said in a voice not much more than a whisper, in case Leddon were gifted with supernatural hearing. 'I know he's young but he's a very good doctor. Poor Bayswater is becoming *so* cranky. He should have retired years ago.' She turned away to pour their tea.

'Is he still in Lydmouth?' Jill asked.

'Dr Bayswater? Yes – still at Grove House, too. That's rather a bone of contention, actually. They say that—' Charlotte broke off and cocked her head. 'Did you hear something?'

'No – what?'

'I . . . I thought I heard Philip calling.' She put Jill's cup down on the table and a few drops of tea slopped into the saucer; she didn't notice. 'Silly of me – he's got a little bell that he uses when he needs me. But sometimes—'

'Old houses are full of noises,' Jill said. 'And they're always louder when one's by oneself in a room.'

'Yes,' Charlotte said. 'Aren't they?'

She joined Jill at the table, absent-mindedly took one of Jill's cigarettes, and then apologised, having realised what she had done. They sat smoking in silence for a moment.

'It's not going to be easy, you know,' Charlotte said. 'The advertising revenue's down for the third successive month.'

'It's a difficult time.'

'We've got the wretched *Post* yapping like a pack of jackals at our heels. And since Cubbitt went, we haven't been able to find a replacement as deputy editor.' Charlotte expelled a great plume of smoke. 'Spineless! There's no other word for it.'

'Who or what?'

'Cubbitt, of course.'

'You can't blame him,' Jill said. 'He had another job to go to, didn't he, and that fight he got into must have left a nasty taste.'

'Pooh, another job? Do you know who owns the *Rosington Observer*?'

'No – but at a guess you're going to tell me it's the same people that own the *Post*.'

'Precisely.' Charlotte was breathing heavily. 'They're quite ruthless. They were always unpleasant to deal with, but things are ten times worse since they promoted Ivor Fuggle.'

'I know,' Jill said gently. 'You told me.'

'I even wondered about that fight: Cubbitt never actually saw his attacker.'

'You're not saying it was Fuggle trying to frighten off the competition?'

'That was the effect it had,' Charlotte said. 'I know it couldn't have been Fuggle himself, he must be nearly sixty, if he's a day, and he's not exactly fighting fit, but I wouldn't put it past him to bribe someone else to do his dirty work for him. Amy Gwyn-Thomas thinks we should have a word with the police.'

'Don't,' Jill said. 'Imagine what Fuggle would do if he caught the merest whisper of it.'

'I suppose so. But Amy does have a point, and I was thinking if I gave Richard Thornhill just a little hint, mentioning no names, of course, and—'

Jill ground out her cigarette in the ashtray. 'I wouldn't, Charlotte, really I wouldn't.'

'Perhaps you're right. Or perhaps you could say something to him. You two used to be quite pally at one time, didn't you?'

'Not pally enough for that,' Jill said, congratulating herself on how cool she felt and how casual she sounded.

'He's doing rather well, by the way.'

'I'm so glad.'

'And have you heard? He and Edith have another child.' Charlotte looked up, and Jill avoided meeting her eyes. 'A little girl – she's called Susie.'

'How nice.' Jill plunged from one uncomfortable subject to another. 'So Amy's still at the *Gazette*?'

'Yes indeed. She's been a tower of strength since Philip was taken poorly. I don't know what I'd have done without her. She'll soon remind you what's what in the office.'

Jill smiled mechanically. At one time Amy had been jealous of the place she assumed that Jill held in Philip's affections. She opened her handbag and put cigarettes and lighter inside.

'I suppose I should go to the flat now. I'd like to unload the car before it gets absolutely dark. Shall I look in on Philip before I leave?'

'Better not, dear. Dr Leddon says it's very important that he should rest in the afternoon. If he's dozing, I wouldn't like to wake him.'

'No, of course not.'

'Now where did I put the letter from the landlord?' Charlotte wondered. 'In my bureau? And you'll need the keys for the office. You collect the keys for the flat at Raglan Court: Mr and Mrs Merton in Flat Three – they're meant to look after things for the landlord.'

She eventually found the letter on the dresser and the keys for the office in Philip's study. On the front doorstep, Jill hesitated and then kissed her on the cheek. For a moment Charlotte clung to her. When she reached the car, Jill looked back at the house and saw Charlotte still standing in the doorway, with her hand resting on her cheek where Jill had kissed her.

Jill had been at Troy House no more than half an hour, but during that time afternoon seemed to have surrendered to evening. The fog was thicker, and the headlights of passing cars made it seem denser still. She drove back down to the war memorial and turned left into Broad Street. The grimy neo-Gothic façade of Grove House reared up on the corner of Whistler's Lane. A moment later, Jill turned left into Albert Road. Raglan Court was at the upper end of the road, a small block of modern flats backing on to Jubilee Park.

She drove round to the car park at the rear of the block. For the next twenty minutes, she lugged her belongings up to the cold little flat on the second floor. The trouble with owning expensive leather suitcases, Jill thought, was that when you

had to carry them yourself, they became a liability rather than an asset. It was a pity Dr Leddon wasn't about.

Most of her belongings were now in store in London; two trunks were due to be delivered by carrier in a few days; the rest of her life was here, piled in a mound of suitcases and boxes in the middle of the living-room. Still in her fur coat, still wearing hat and gloves, Jill postponed unpacking and prowled through her new home. The furniture came with the flat. She would need to find a comfortable armchair to sit and read in. She laughed aloud, her breath visible in the chilly air of the living-room.

So this was what she had achieved in life: a cramped, rented flat without even a decent chair in it. She glanced at the box that contained the bottles. But half-past four in the afternoon was not the time for a glass of brandy, however warming it would be. Instead she lit a cigarette and wandered into the bedroom.

Without turning on the light, she stood smoking by the window. The glow from a lamp-post cast a puddle of murky light on the moist tarmac. From here she had a view of the main gates of Jubilee Park, a prospect which had aroused the estate agent's enthusiasm, if not hers. At right angles to the gates was the cemetery.

As she watched, a sturdy little woman ploughed her way through the puddle of light, towing a very small dog. The animal stopped, forcing the woman to stop too, and pointed his head towards the entrance to the cemetery. He barked shrilly, the sound clearly audible even though the windows were shut. The woman dragged the dog, a tiny terrier, under the archway and into the darkness of the park beyond.

Jill remained where she was. Just inside the cemetery, a match flared. For an instant, in the orange glow of flame, she saw a man's face, so briefly and indistinctly that it was devoid

of individuality. The flame vanished. The darkness returned.

With a shiver, Jill pulled the curtains across the window. Richard Thornhill, she thought, though the face hadn't been his, and though in the years she had known him he had never smoked a cigarette: Richard, you bastard.