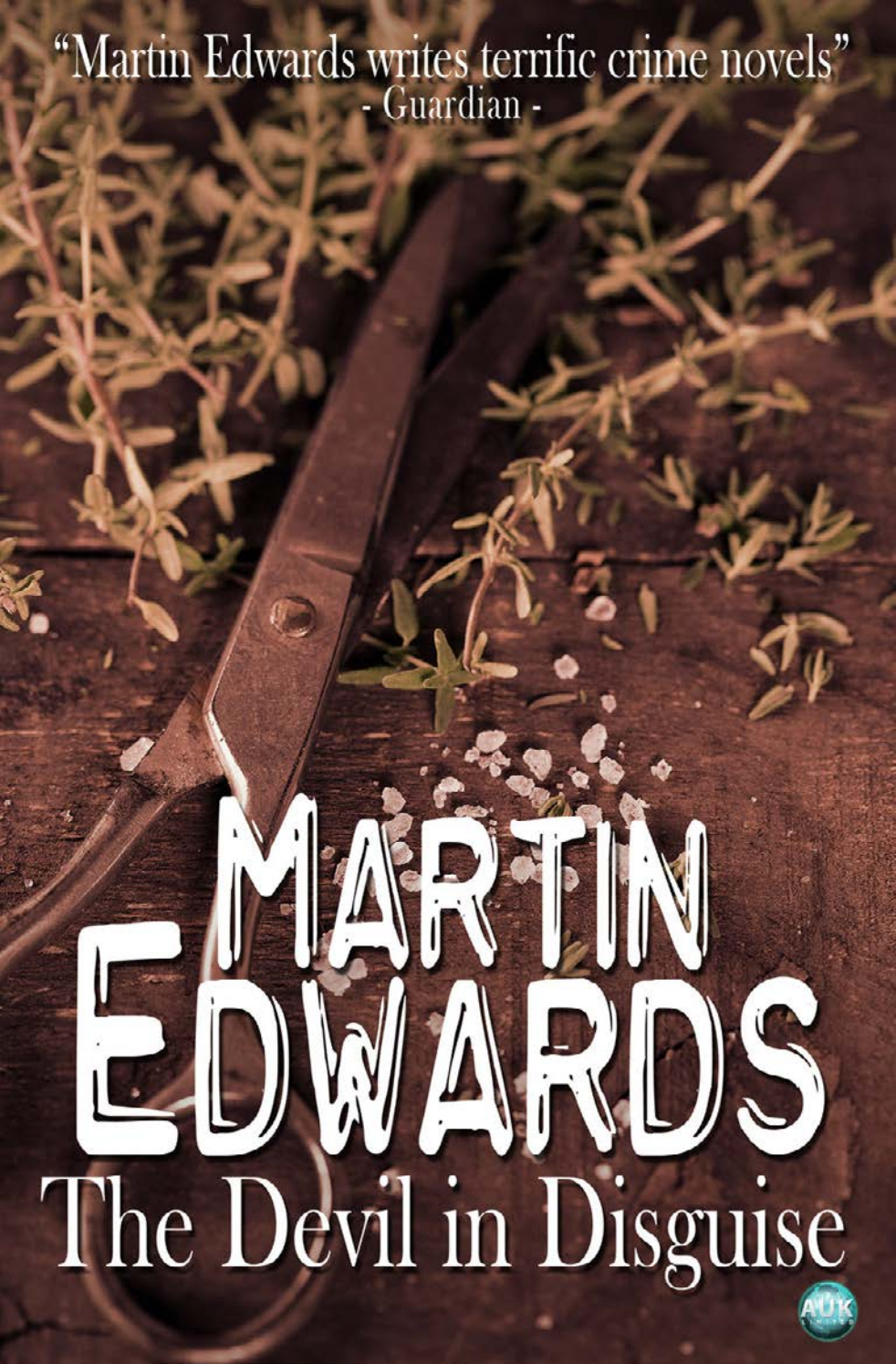


“Martin Edwards writes terrific crime novels”
- Guardian -



MARTIN EDWARDS

The Devil in Disguise



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THE DEVIL IN DISGUISE

by
Martin Edwards

Publisher Information

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Note from the author: In writing this book, I have been grateful for the help of friends and colleagues expert on the Liverpool and legal scenes. Nevertheless, this is a work of fiction and all the characters, firms, organisations and incidents described are wholly imaginary. So far as I know, they do not resemble any counterparts in the real world; in the unlikely event that any similarity does exist, it is an unintended coincidence.

Introduction

There is something mysterious, not to say suspicious, about Martin Edwards. How does he do so much? Leaving aside his highly successful legal career, which would be more than enough for most people, he's the author of the critically-acclaimed Lake District mysteries, one of which was shortlisted for the Theakston's Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year. His other books include a perceptive re-examination of the Crippen case in the form of a novel, a true crime book and a collection of some of his 40-odd short stories, one of which won the Dagger award of the Crime Writers' Association. He has a third career as an editor and critic on the crime fiction genre. And then of course there are his legal books and more than a thousand articles, many of them concerning his professional speciality, which is employment law.

This crowded and nauseatingly distinguished curriculum vitae has one important omission: the Harry Devlin crime series, which features a Liverpool solicitor with a propensity for stumbling into murder cases. These were Martin Edwards' first published novels. On both sides of the Atlantic, there's a long tradition of lawyers moonlighting with crime fiction - and often writing novels with legal backgrounds. From the very start, however, Martin Edwards stood out among such lawyer-authors, even in a crowd that includes Erle Stanley Gardner and Michael Gilbert, Frances Fyfield and John Grisham.

Reviewers instantly recognised this - the first Harry Devlin novel, *All The Lonely People*, was shortlisted for the CWA's John Creasey Memorial Dagger for the best first crime novel in 1991. The book had three particular strengths: its lovingly knowledgeable portrait of Liverpool; Martin Edwards' quietly revolutionary refusal to follow the then-current trend for portraying overt violence in crime fiction; and the strength of the characterisation, in particular Harry himself

- damaged, endearing, intelligent and obstinately attached to the notion of justice.

Since then, the series has gone from strength to strength. The pop songs of the Sixties provide titles for all the books, giving them an added resonance for readers old enough to remember the songs when they were hit singles. After a gap of some years, the eighth novel in the series, *Waterloo Sunset*, appeared in 2008.

The series isn't frozen in time - both Harry and Liverpool have changed over the years. In the modern world it's not easy to create a credible amateur detective. But Harry is convincing, perhaps because he lacks the superheroic qualities of the amateur sleuths of the Golden Age crime fiction. He is a very British hero. It's a cause for celebration that he is still flourishing today.

Originally published in 1998, *The Devil In Disguise* is the sixth title in the series - though don't let this put you off reading it if you haven't yet read the earlier books; like all the Devlin novels, this works just as well as a standalone. The story focuses on the Kavanaugh Trust, a Liverpool arts charity, which hires Harry to deal with the vexed question of a benefactor's will - a will that unexpectedly does not benefit the Trust. Then Luke Dessaur, the chairman of the Trust, vanishes; and when he reappears, fallen from the third-floor window of a hotel, he is very dead indeed.

Martin Edwards draws his readers - and the unfortunate Harry - into a tangle of villainy. As ever, the novel is a cunning mix of contemporary and traditional ingredients. However dark the story, however, it is characteristic of Edwards' writing that an undercurrent of dry humour is often just perceptible. Watch out for the Liverpool's gentlemen's club, for example, the oldest in the country and equipped with the splendid collection of pornography in its members-only library. There's also a certain nostalgic pleasure in the *Speckled Band*, a bookshop devoted to crime fiction. In those days, London boasted three bookshops dedicated to crime fiction - indeed, Martin and I shared a book-launch in one of them when this novel was first published. Time and the internet has put paid to all three of them.

Still, time and the internet has its advantages too: thanks to their mysterious workings, *The Devil In Disguise* has become available again. When I reviewed the novel on first publication in 1998, I concluded that it was 'literate, quirky and intelligent... psychologically plausible and intelligently plotted.' Thirteen years later, I stand by the verdict but I'd like to add a rider to it: *The Devil In Disguise* reads even better the second time around than it did the first.

Andrew Taylor

Prologue

He had dreamed of this.

Her parting words echoed around the cellar. 'Don't go away.'

As if he would. As if he could. Listening to her high heels click-click-click up the stone steps, he smiled to himself. He could have sworn he heard her choke back a grunt of pleasure at the prospect of what lay in store. The door closed behind her: was that a key turning in the lock, or just wishful thinking? He had always wanted to be her prisoner. And tonight his imagination was working overtime.

The steel handcuffs were cutting into his wrists, but for him the sensation was exquisite. At last she had consented to play the game. She seemed different, somehow, as if the fantasy excited her as much as he had ever hoped.

Waiting for her return, he stretched his limbs. She had snapped the other half of each pair of cuffs around the hooks set into the wall a little above head height. He let his mind wander. This was an old room; perhaps eighteenth-century merchants had once tethered their own slaves here. Those poor devils would not have chosen such a fate, but he luxuriated in it. He could move his trunk and legs, feel the warmth of the sheepskin rug against his feet. Presently she would release him and they would make love with wild passion.

Although he was in the heart of Liverpool, he might have been marooned on a Pacific atoll for all that he was aware of the world above ground. It was night-time in the city, but he could hear no voices or traffic noise, nothing but the faint buzz of an unseen fly. The air was damp and musty but he did not care. This was as close to heaven as he was ever likely to come.

The fly landed on his chest and he blew it off. She was taking her time, he thought. Impossible to understand: she had promised to be back within a minute, once she had checked that the front door was locked. They did not want any unexpected callers, not tonight of all nights.

He opened his eyes and tried adjusting to the gloom. An unshaded bulb glowed overhead, but most of the room was in deep shadow. Straight ahead, she had propped the dusty old mirror. All the better to see everything with, she had said. She had written something in lipstick on the splintered surface of the glass and he craned his neck so that he could read it.

YOU KILLED HIM, YOU BASTARD

It was as though a donkey had kicked him in the balls. He blinked once, twice, unable to believe the message in the words. Was his mind playing games of its own? He screwed up his eyes so hard that the muscles hurt and looked again.

YOU KILLED HIM, YOU BASTARD

It couldn't be true. She was teasing him. He sucked the moist air into his lungs and held his breath, telling himself that she was on her way back, that it was all some kind of joke. But in the end he had to exhale.

Slowly, experimentally, he tried to move his wrists. The handcuffs did not give. His skin was beginning to itch. The unseen fly was buzzing in the shadows, as if in mocking reminder that it was free.

Time passed. His breath was coming in short shallow gasps. He did not understand what was happening. Everything had seemed so perfect. Yet now he was limp and cold and afraid. And the heaven he had dreamed of had turned into his own private hell.

Part One

Chapter 1

A solitary candle lit the darkness, allowing Harry Devlin to see the man in crimson robes. The sickly smell of incense hung in the air. The high priest was standing in front of the altar, his arm raised. As the flame flickered, Harry caught sight of a gleaming blade.

‘Blood is the sacred life-force in both man and beast,’ a disembodied voice intoned. ‘The rite of sacrifice enables gods to live and thus man and nature may survive.’

A small bundle lay trussed up on the altar. The whimper of a child cut through the silence. Harry’s stomach lurched and instinctively he took a pace forward. Suddenly he remembered where he was. He halted, feeling foolish. Why did his imagination always run away with him? He was a grown man, a solicitor of the Supreme Court, supposed to be dispassionate and the master of his emotions. Yet he could not help shivering when he felt a touch upon his spine.

‘Frightening, isn’t it?’

He spun round. A woman was studying him intently, as if he were a specimen in a glass case. His cheeks felt hot and he said awkwardly, ‘For a moment, I almost believed...’

‘That’s what we like to hear, Harry.’ She bent her head towards his and added in a whisper, ‘You know, the sign outside does make it clear that the exhibition isn’t suitable for small children. Parents never cease to amaze me.’

A harassed teenage girl hurried past them, dragging a pushchair. Its occupant’s whimper had matured into a wail. Harry always admired the fortitude of those who had children, but he kept quiet, guessing that Frances Silverwood would regard his reaction as another example of the inability of his head to rule his heart.

‘Very lifelike,’ he said. ‘I know a judge who might be the twin of your high priest. Come to think of it, I’m not sure which one is the dummy.’

‘Sorry to keep you waiting after I begged you to come over here,’ she said, raising her voice to compete with the loudspeaker commentary. ‘I had to take a call from my opposite number at the Smithsonian.’

‘When they told me you were engaged I thought I’d take a look,’ Harry said. He gestured to the sign by the entrance: *Understanding the Supernatural*. ‘I wondered if it might give me a clue to the workings of the British legal system.’

‘Bad day in court?’ she asked over her shoulder as she led him through a door marked *Museum Staff Only*. He followed her down a long corridor so still that the slap of her flat-heeled shoes against the floor tiles sounded unnaturally loud.

He gave a rueful grin. ‘The woman I was acting for was found guilty of *not* being a witch.’

She paused in mid-stride. ‘You’re teasing me.’

‘Lawyer’s honour. When witchcraft ceased to be a hanging offence, Parliament made it a crime to pretend to use sorcery. So being a *genuine* witch became a defence to the charge. My client was accused of casting a spell on her best friend’s unfaithful husband, to make him love her again.’

‘Good God. What happened?’

‘The magic didn’t work. To make matters worst, the friend found my client in bed with her man. There was a fight, the police were called and a prosecutor with time on his hands decided to test out the law on fraudulent mediums.’

‘Only in Liverpool.’

Frances laughed, a rich deep sound. On a bad day, Harry thought, she might be mistaken for a witch herself. She was striking rather than beautiful in appearance, with a high forehead and sharp chin. As he had got to know her, he had begun to realise that her abrupt manner was a mask for shyness. He’d grown to like her and to believe it would do her good to laugh a little more often.

They arrived at a door whose sign bore her name and title: *Keeper of Ethnographical Artefacts*. She waved him inside and as he took a seat on a hard plastic chair, his eye caught a ghastly face staring at him from a display cabinet on the wall. It was a shrunken brown head with flowing black locks and its ravaged features had formed into the expression of a soul in torment. Harry's flesh prickled. With an effort he tore his eyes away and focused his gaze on the Native American portrait calendar on the wall behind Frances's desk.

'Sorry to startle you,' she said briskly. 'I should have given you advance warning. I'm very fond of Uncle Joe, but I tend to take him for granted nowadays.'

Trying to make light of it, he said, 'I ought to expect something out of the ordinary in a place like this. But why isn't he out on display?'

'Preservation is a problem with human remains,' she said crisply. 'Many of them were brought over from the colonies in the nineteenth century. We had to inter a number of Uncle Joe's colleagues in the local cemetery when the smell became too much to bear.'

Harry shuddered and glanced again at the shrunken head. Once it had belonged to a human being who lived and breathed. He felt his gorge rising.

Frances said, 'You don't approve?'

'Perhaps I'm too squeamish.'

'He keeps me company,' she said with a shrug.

Forcing a smile, he said, 'He looks even sterner than Luke Dessaur when a trustee turns up late for a meeting.'

To his surprise, she flushed. 'Strange you should say that. Luke is the reason why I asked you to come over here at such short notice.'

'I assumed that it was in connection with the meeting tonight.'

'It is. You see, Luke's told me that he's unable to come. The first time he's ever missed since he became chairman. I'm worried about him, Harry.'

He stared. 'Why's that?'

'I think - he's afraid of something.'

'Afraid?'

Harry did not try to hide his incredulity. Could she be joking? Her earnest face gave no hint of it: no smile, no twinkle in the deep-set eyes. She was leaning forward, chin cradled in her hands, elbows touching her overflowing in-tray. Her whole body was rigid and he could sense the tension in her shoulder blades, almost taste the dryness of her lips.

Yet the thought of the chairman of the Kavanaugh Trust experiencing fear was comic in its absurdity. In Luke's presence, Harry always found himself fretting about the shine on his shoes or the length of his hair. Luke was the sort who had a fetish about punctuality and never took the minutes of the last trustees' meeting as read. He was capable of great personal kindness, but Harry had never heard him split an infinitive and suspected that he would rather face torture than surrender the crease in his trousers. What could perturb such a man - other than, perhaps, the prospect of having to act on Harry's advice?

'What exactly is the problem?'

Harry noticed a tear in the corner of Frances's eye. Hot with embarrassment, he studied his palms whilst she dabbed at her face with a tissue.

'I wish I knew. Last week he and I went to a rehearsal of a musical the Trust is subsidising. He seemed preoccupied, but then, he's hardly an extrovert. After a quick drink, I left him in the bar having a chat with the producer. I had to be up early for a train trip to London the next morning. When I arrived back, I gave him a ring at home. He was out, so I left a message on his answering machine. He didn't call back the next day, which puzzled me. It was so unlike him.'

Harry nodded. Luke always returned calls and responded to letters without delay. Something of a paragon. And as a client, therefore, something of a pain as well. Most of the people Harry acted for were consistent only in their incompetence. The previous day he'd been called out to advise a burglar arrested after being spotted by a woman whose house he had robbed the night before. She had recognised him because he was wearing her husband's clothes.

'I called again. Same thing. This time he did ring back. He sounded agitated and I asked if he was all right, but he assured me everything was fine. I thought he might be ill and not looking after himself properly. That night I dialled his home at around ten thirty, but again I could only get the answering machine. The day after, I bumped into him in the street as I was coming back from a meeting at the Albert Dock.'

'How did he seem?'

'His face was like chalk and he'd been gnawing at his fingernails. He looked as though he hadn't slept a wink since I'd last seen him. His hands kept trembling and his manner was twitchy. Suddenly I realised that he wasn't ill. He was worried sick.' She let out a breath. 'I said as much and he bit my head off. Told me not to interfere in his private business, said he could look after himself perfectly well. He'd never felt better. I was dumbstruck.'

'I bet.' Harry began to realise why Frances was concerned. Luke being rude? The Archbishop of Canterbury was more likely to let rip with a string of obscenities.

'After a couple of minutes, he calmed down and apologised. He did admit he had things on his mind, but said I shouldn't trouble myself about them. He would be fine. And that was that. There was nothing more I could do. Luke's lived alone ever since Gwendoline died. And he's proud, too. He wouldn't seek help even if he really needed it.'

'He's no fool.'

'But people don't always behave rationally, do they?' Frances said.

Don't I know it? thought Harry. Yet Luke Dessaur was one person who had always struck him as supremely rational. He had been personnel director for an arts and heritage charity before taking early retirement at fifty, weary of the endless round of redundancies and budget cuts, and devoting himself to the Kavanaugh Trust. 'So what did you do?'

'I called round at his house this lunch-time. I rang his bell and rapped on the door until my knuckles were sore, but there was no answer. Then a woman passed by. His next-door neighbour. She said

that if I was hoping to find Luke, I was out of luck. She'd seen him driving off a few minutes earlier. He'd put an overnight case into his car.'

'Observant lady.'

'She's an old gossip with too much time on her hands,' Frances said. 'Though who am I to talk? I suppose you think I'm overreacting.'

'Not at all.'

What he really thought was that Frances's dismay revealed how sweet she was on Luke. He'd suspected it for a while. Looking round her office, he saw no evidence of a private life. No photographs, nothing unconnected with her work, although he knew that in her spare time she was a keen singer. He had heard her once at a private party, singing about the loss of love and loneliness. For his part, Luke had been a widower for years. Maybe she thought it time they both had a change of status.

'When I arrived back from Luke's house, there was a message from him on my voicemail. He asked me to present his apologies to the meeting tonight. He spoke in a jerky way, as if his nerves were in pieces. I called his mobile this time and managed to catch him. Though I guessed that he regretted answering as soon as he heard it was me on the line. It was as if he'd been hoping to hear from someone else.'

'What did you say?'

'I said he needn't try to bluff me. I knew him too well not to realise he was sick with worry. I asked him to talk to me, to trust me with the problem, whatever it was. He didn't bother to deny the truth of what I was saying, but he said there was nothing I could do, nothing anyone could do. He was desperate to get off the line. Finally he said a quick goodbye and put down the phone before I could utter another word.' She groaned, put her head in her hands. 'This must all sound ridiculous to you. Am I being silly?'

'You're bound to be anxious. And confused.' Harry paused. He thought about telling her of his own last conversation with Luke Dessaur, but something held him back. 'What's the explanation

for the overnight case? Is there anyone he might be visiting? What about his godson?

'You know Ashley Whitaker?'

'Yes, I often buy books from him. I first met Luke through Ashley, as it happens - years before Crusoe and Devlin started to act for the Kavanaugh Trust.'

'Luke can't be staying with him. Ashley and his wife are attending a book fair in Canada. I remember Luke mentioning it that night at the theatre.'

'Any other lines of inquiry?'

'You sound like a policeman,' she said. 'I know you have been involved in a number of - unusual cases, but I would hate to think...'

Harry loosened his tie. The room was warmed by twin radiators and poorly ventilated. Perhaps that, and the watchful presence of Uncle Joe, explained why he felt so uncomfortable. 'Luke's behaviour is a mystery.'

'Yes, but it's not...'

Again, she allowed her voice to trail away. Harry could guess the reason. She had meant to say: *it's not a murder mystery*. He said gently, 'Anyone else who might be worth contacting?'

She pushed a hand through her thick black hair. 'He's a good man, as you well know, but I wouldn't say that he has many friends. He and Gwendoline lived for each other. Since she died, I think he has led a solitary life. But I would have expected him to let me know if anything was amiss.'

Harry caught the eye of the shrunken head and quickly glanced away again. How could Frances concentrate on her work with that face staring down at her? 'Has he seemed out of sorts before?'

'As you might expect, this business with Vera Blackhurst has appalled him. He is very suspicious of her. He's even said that the Trust's survival might depend on the outcome of her claim. The Trust means a great deal to him - and we are desperate for money. But I can't believe there is any reason for him simply to... well, to act as though he is personally under threat.'

'Have you discussed this with the other trustees?'

‘Only with Matthew Cullinan and even with him I was rather circumspect. He oozed charm as usual, but he obviously thought I was making a mountain out of a molehill. Perhaps I am. Even so, I wanted to have a word with you before tonight’s meeting. I was sure that you would listen to me patiently. As you have. Sorry to come crying on your shoulder.’

She smiled ruefully and Harry found himself having to fight the urge to give her hand a comforting squeeze.

She wasn’t his type, but he had a lot of time for Frances Silverwood.

‘I’m sure Luke will be fine,’ he said. But he wasn’t sure that he really believed it.

She stood up. ‘Thank you for hearing me out, Harry. I expect this will probably all blow over and I’ll have made a complete fool of myself in Matthew Cullinan’s eyes. Worrying over nothing.’

Harry stood up and took a last glance at the shrunken head. It stared back, as if to say: *You know it’s right to fear the worst.*

Chapter 2

A gale was blowing the litter down Dale Street as Harry headed back towards his office. Empty burger cartons, chip papers and hot-dog wrappers were strewn along the pavement. He'd read that nutritionists believed there was a link between junk food and delinquency. If they were right, Liverpool was in for a crime wave.

He turned up his coat collar. Whoever said that April is the cruellest month had never spent January in Merseyside. It was one of the harshest winters he could remember and the forecasters promised worse to come. As his partner Jim Crusoe pointed out, it was perfect weather for probate lawyers. A cold snap that carried off a few elderly clients was always good for a solicitor's cashflow. Harry's sympathy was with the old people. After the warmth of the museum, the bitterness of the wind was hard to bear.

Yet the chill in his bones owed less to the weather than to his recollection of his last meeting with Luke Dessaur and the conversation which he had decided against mentioning to Frances Silverwood. A week earlier, Luke had called at Crusoe and Devlin's office in Fenwick Court. He had brought a letter from Geoffrey Willatt, the lawyer acting for Vera Blackhurst. Harry had been surprised to see him; the letter could have been sent by post or fax and a busy man would usually prefer a quick word over the telephone.

Luke was worried, that was obvious. In his early fifties, he was still a handsome man, tall and erect in his three-

piece pinstripe with exquisitely coiffured grey hair. He

had, Harry always thought, the confidence and charm of a leading counsel as well as the same small vanities: the fob-watch, the gleaming gold crowns, the natural assumption that every considered view he expressed was right. Frances was not, Harry felt sure, the only woman Luke left weak at the knees. Yet for once he looked his age. His brow was furrowed and he kept breaking off his sentences to rub tired eyes.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘if you are absolutely sure...’

‘Don’t worry,’ Harry said, not for the first time. ‘Vera Blackhurst can’t take the money and run. Even though she’s flourishing a will made in her favour and appointing her as executor of Charles Kavanaugh’s estate, remember we’ve lodged a caveat with the court. So she isn’t allowed to obtain probate and make off with all his money until the dispute has been resolved.’

Luke sighed. ‘In that case, I suppose we can do nothing more until the trustees meet.’

‘Right. Everything’s under control.’

It was a bold claim for any lawyer, let alone Harry, to make but it prompted Luke to nod his thanks before climbing to his feet and picking up his coat. At the door he paused.

‘There is one other thing that I suppose I ought to mention.’

Harry had years of experience in dealing with people who had difficulty in coming to the point, but he would never have expected Luke to be one of them. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘It’s rather embarrassing. You see, I’m concerned by the behaviour of one of the trustees. It seems to me that the person in question may - may have been deceiving me.’

‘Can you tell me more?’

‘I’d rather not at this stage, if you don’t mind. I need to think things through, perhaps speak to the individual concerned before I take matters any further. But to be frank, I’ve been having a few sleepless nights. And - I’m not making excuses - I may have been slightly indiscreet.’

‘I doubt it,’ Harry said. It wasn’t flattery. He knew few people less likely to talk out of turn than Luke.

‘Kind of you to say so, but I did mention that I was concerned about the Trust to - to someone the other day. Of course, I didn’t mention any names and he said at once that I ought to seek legal advice.’

Harry thought for a moment. ‘Was it Ashley Whitaker, by any chance?’

A rare smile flitted across Luke Dessaur's face. 'It's true what people say, Harry. You have missed your vocation as a detective. How did you guess?'

'The explanation's always a let-down,' Harry said. 'It's simply that I know you would only discuss something like this with someone you could trust.'

'You're right, as it happens. I value his judgment - and of course he was right. So I may need to consult you soon, for advice on the removal of one of the trustees.'

'Ah.'

'It is a very delicate matter.' Luke hunched his shoulders. 'Most distressing. Perhaps either you or your partner would care to refresh your minds about the precise terms of the trust deed. Unless I am very much mistaken, we will have to speak about this again.'

'Call me any time.'

But Luke had not been in touch again after that strange, unsatisfactory conversation - and now, if Frances was to be believed, his concern had turned into fear.

As soon as he was back in his own room, Harry hunted around for the lever arch files which contained the bulk of the Kavanaugh Trust papers. One came to light under his desk; another was propping up the unsteady table on which stood his new (or more precisely, reconditioned) computer. The revolution in information technology had touched even Crusoe and Devlin, but where Harry was concerned, there would always be scope for the lowest of low tech. The screen was blank: he reminded himself to switch the machine on before Jim Crusoe looked round the door and upbraided him for Luddism.

He opened the current file and a couple of dozen sheets spilled through his hands and on to the floor. As he scrambled around picking them up, he reflected that for all the computer salesman's honeyed words, the paperless office was as much a pipe-dream as the paperless toilet. When the documentation was back in its proper order, he began to sift through it in preparation for the evening.

At least if the chairman did not turn up, the other trustees were less likely to put penetrating questions or to realise that he was practically innumerate. He gazed at the mass of dividend payment request forms and wondered why charity had to go hand in hand with bureaucracy. Surely that was not what Gervase Kavanaugh had intended?

A large figure loomed in the doorway. Jim Crusoe lifted his thick eyebrows in mock astonishment. 'Harry Devlin studying a file? What next?'

'The Kavanaugh Trust papers. I thought I'd better brush up for this evening. Why did I let you talk me into becoming involved?'

'We agreed, remember?' Jim eased himself down in the client's chair and Harry fancied that he heard it creak under the strain. His partner had put on weight recently: the result of too much home cooking as he tried to make up to his wife for a relationship with another woman of which Heather Crusoe was so far unaware. 'I would handle the money side. You'd deal with the litigation.'

It was true. When Crusoe and Devlin had acquired the business of Tweats and Company, they had taken over the files of a handful of estimable clients, including the Kavanaugh Trust. A surprising number of otherwise sensible people had never rumbled the fact that Cyril Tweats, for all that he modelled his bedside manner on Dr Finlay, knew rather less about the law than the average reader of John Grisham. Harry had been content to let Jim handle the work and his partner's offer had seemed like a good deal at the time. When did a local charity ever become embroiled in courtroom battles?

Certainly, there was no reason to expect the Trust to engage in disputes. It had been founded by an elderly composer whose music had enjoyed a brief vogue in the thirties. Shortly before his death, Gervase Kavanaugh had set up a charitable trust with a view to distributing largesse to worthy causes in the arts in Liverpool. His son Charles, a lifelong bachelor, had regarded himself as a discerning connoisseur of art, although in truth he had as much aesthetic sensibility as a bullfrog (a creature to which he had borne a disconcerting physical resemblance). He had made a will years

back leaving his estate to the Trust. A fortnight ago he had died in a nursing home following a short illness. After expressing their sorrow and paying tribute to his support, the trustees had turned their minds to the pleasant dilemma of how to spend all the money. The injection of new funds would be welcome since little was left of the original endowment. Charles's demise could not have been more timely. And then they had learned he had left his fortune to his housekeeper-companion, Vera Blackhurst.

'We can't fight her claim all the way to court. Our case isn't strong enough and the trustees can't afford the risk. Though I think we ought to check Vera out.'

Jim's eyes narrowed. 'Listen, I don't want you doing your Sexton Blake bit on behalf of the Trust. They aren't the kind of clients to mess around with. If there's any inquiry work to be done, we play it by the book, okay? Get them to instruct Jonah Deegan.'

'All right, all right. But there's something else you should know.'

He reported his conversation with Frances Silverwood and Jim shook his head. 'Luke afraid? I don't believe a word of it.'

'He came to see me the other day. I was waiting for him to come back to me before I mentioned it to you. He reckoned one of the trustees was deceiving him.'

'Good God. Who was he pointing the finger at?'

'He wouldn't say. But he was obviously troubled. Talked about losing sleep. He'd even mentioned it to Ashley Whitaker, who quite rightly told him to have a word with us.'

'But why should he be afraid? It's not like Luke to go over the top.'

'It's not like Frances to exaggerate, either,' Harry said grimly. 'Maybe I'll learn more at tonight's meeting. Matthew Cullinan's hired a room at the Piquet Club.'

'My God, you are moving in exalted circles. Don't they say that's the oldest gentlemen's club in England?'

'From what I've heard, that's because it caters for the oldest gentlemen. Matthew's probably the youngest member they've ever had. He's just been elected, apparently.'

Jim whistled. 'So soon? I heard there was a five-year waiting list.'

'Not if you're an offspring of Lord Gralam. He's even arranged for an outside caterer to come in to make sure that we are fed and watered.'

'All the trustees' meetings I've attended,' Jim grumbled, 'I've never done better than soup and sandwiches.'

Harry patted his partner on the shoulder. 'Sorry, mate. I've learned this much from rubbing shoulders with the nobility. It's not what you do that matters. It's who you know.'

The streets had been dark for a couple of hours by the time Harry found himself outside the entrance to the Piquet Club. A uniformed commissionaire who bore a marked resemblance to Sir John Gielgud opened the door eighteen inches and examined Harry's Marks and Spencer suit and Hush Puppies with disdain.

'May I help you?' The plummy tones made Sir John sound like a bingo caller.

Harry conquered the temptation to tug a forelock and said tentatively, 'Kavanaugh Trust?'

'Ah yes' - the commissionaire paused - 'sir. Take the stairs and it's on your left on the second landing.'

As he climbed the wide curving staircase, Harry studied the sepia-tinted pictures of eminent past members. Bewhiskered men with stern faces, proud Liverpudlians who had lived in an age when the city was great. The club was legendary for its wealth, derived from endowments established by merchants who had taken time off from slave trading to play cards with each other. He paused on the first landing, opposite a door marked *Strictly Private* and guarded by a security camera and alarm. Presumably that was where they kept their etchings: the Piquet Club's other claim to fame was that it boasted one of the finest collections of erotica in private hands. The stuff was supposed to make the Kama Sutra look as racy as *Teach Yourself Origami*.

On the second landing, he glanced through an open door to his right. A couple of white-haired men with hearing aids were playing

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