

The Naked Nuns

Colin Watson

Chapter One

The cablegram was addressed to Hatch, Floradora, Flaxborough, England. It read:

TWO NAKEDNUNS AVAILABLE PHILADELPHIA STOP PERF NINETEEN FIFTEEN STOP
EIGHT DAYS OPTION STOP DOLLARS THREE THOUSAND FIVE STOP INSTRUCT LONDON
SOONEST STOP INFORMED FOUR NUNS ON OFFER DALLAS STOP WILL INVESTIGATE

The signature was Pake.

Telegraphic communications were so rare nowadays that no one at Flaxborough Post Office could remember whose job it was supposed to be to ride out on the red motor cycle that was propped up, gathering dust in a corner of the mail van garage. So telegrams, as a general rule, were treated like letters and delivered on the next regular round, with perhaps an extra knock or ring to signify urgency.

Here, though, was a wire that had come all the way from America and, queer as its phrasing was, implied big business dealing of some kind. The Postmaster, appealed to for a decision, ruled that immediate action was warranted, and one of the counter clerks, who lived not far from the Floradora Country Club, was instructed to deliver the cable when he went home for his tea.

Unfortunately, that happened to be a time of day when neither Mr Hatch nor anyone to whom he had deputed authority was on the club premises. The wire was accepted reluctantly by a Miss Ryland, a spinster and temporary telephonist of this parish, who said that she would hand it to Mr Hatch's secretary the moment he returned at six o'clock.

Gladys Ryland was one of those people for whom any unopened telegram is like an over-termed pregnancy: they dread learning of something having gone wrong and at the same time fear the fatal consequence of inaction. At the end of twenty minutes' increasingly nervous indecision, she resolved upon a caesarian.

She read the wire through three times very slowly. The only sign she gave of any reaction was a slight shiver. And perhaps the line of her lips had tightened a fraction.

She copied the wording carefully upon a leaf torn from the telephone message pad, folded it twice and put it in her purse. The telegram she restored to its envelope. When Mr Amis, Mr Hatch's secretary, came in at five minutes past six, she handed it to him and said, "I opened it to see if it was anything urgent, but I couldn't make much sense of it, I'm afraid, so I left it for you to deal with." And Miss Ryland favoured Mr Amis with a smile—of sorts—and he said thank you very much, he expected Mr Hatch would know what it was about, and took the telegram off with him.

On the following morning, Miss Ryland went to the police station and presented her copy of the cable to Detective Inspector Purbright. She assured him—and he said he believed her—that she was not the sort of woman to betray an employer's trust, but she did think that any evidence, however slight, that suggested a white slave traffic ought to be examined and followed up by the authorities.

The inspector, who privately wondered how nuns might be identified as such in the total absence of their habits and what they might be doing in Philadelphia, of all places, in such a condition, promised Miss Ryland that her information would be most carefully borne in mind.

Chapter Two

The Deputy Town Clerk of Flaxborough stared down reflectively upon the satin nightdress case of Mrs Sophie Hatch. Embroidered in black on its pale lemon quilting, her initials—floridly gothic—looked like a request for silence. The Deputy Town Clerk sipped his cocktail, gauged the considerable depth of Mrs Hatch's bedroom carpet by burrowing into it with the point of his shoe, and wondered whether he had been wise, after all, to accept her invitation.

"It usually happens just about now," said Mrs Hatch. She looked nervously at the clock of the bedside tea-maker, then glanced out of the huge picture window that ran the whole length of one wall.

"Last night, it was exactly at a quarter to eight. Exactly." She looked again at the clock. It showed three minutes past the quarter.

"Perhaps it's gone wrong. These things often do. It could have gone wrong."

The speaker was a tall, thin woman in a purple velvet dress that hung upon her angular frame like a dust cover. Mrs Vera Scorpe. Wife of a solicitor. On her face was eager condolence.

Mrs Hatch acknowledged with a quavery little laugh Mrs Scorpe's ingenuousness.

"Gone wrong? Oh, dear, no. It's got a magic eye. That's electronics. They don't go wrong nowadays. Not good ones."

"Magic eye, for God's sake," said Mrs Scorpe to herself. She smiled icily at the ceiling.

"Of course, clouds can have an effect," said a squat, pink-faced man, the branch manager of the bank patronised by Arnold Hatch and his company, Marshside Developments, and a great pourer of oysters upon troubled waters. His wife turned from an examination of the bottles and jars on Mrs Hatch's dressing-table long enough to nod in vigorous agreement.

"Have some more White Ladies," Mrs Hatch urged suddenly. She grasped the neck of a square, vivid green bottle, and swung it in a general invitation. The Deputy Town Clerk, whose name was Dampier-Small, said "No—no, really" several times while he held out his glass to be filled. The other guests made grateful little noises. "Lovely," said Mrs Beach, the bank manager's wife, after making sure that her husband was having a second drink.

Only Mrs Scorpe remained aloof. "White Ladies!" she murmured to her friend, the ceiling. "I am not you!"

There were eight people in the room. The three who had contributed least to the conversation so far were a Mr and Mrs Maddox and a stout, leathery lady encased for the most part in wool and carrying on her arm a handbag of great size. This was Miss Cadbury, secretary of a local canine charity. She peered into her refilled glass mistrustfully, as if examining a urine sample from a sick Great Dane: Mr Maddox, manager of the Roebuck Hotel, also looked perplexed but he was enough of a professional to disguise his dubiety as slowly dawning appreciation.

"Do you happen to know," Mrs Hatch inquired of Mr Dampier-Small, "if Councillor Crispin and his, ah, his good lady are coming along? I did let them have an invite. That's to say my husband's private secretary did. I think."

The Deputy Town Clerk was sorry, but he had not seen Councillor Crispin since that morning sitting of the Highways Committee.

"Never mind," said Mrs Hatch. "It's probably her boils again."

She looked again at the bedside clock. Ten minutes to eight. Mrs Scorpe noticed and smirked.

"Light is a funny thing," observed Mr Beach, charitably. "It often deceives the eye."

"Not a *magic* eye." Mrs Scorpe was unrelenting in her irony.

"When my husband was manager at the Peterborough Branch," said Mrs Beach, "they had a burglar alarm system worked by light. Beams of light, you know. And he worked out a way that thieves might use to get past it. Didn't you, Ted? And they changed the system. Didn't they, Ted?"

Change it?"

"Well, actually..."

"It meant promotion for him, you know. Banks are very security-minded. Well, they have to be. Don't they, Ted?"

Mr Maddox spoke.

"My wife and I have been admiring your, ah, your very tasteful..." He gestured vaguely with his hand to the glass.

Mrs Hatch's air of anxiety was dispelled momentarily by a smile of gratification. She watched Mrs Maddox gaze in turn at the mother-of-pearl vinyl wall covering, the café-au-lait fitted carpet, the dressing-table in the semblance of a white grand piano (the keys worked little drawers containing cosmetics and the "score" on the music stand was a mirror etched with notes and clef signs), the midnight blue buttoned-padding ceiling, and, dominating even these wonders, the vast water bed—round, lung-pink, be-frilled slab that wobbled with the passage of traffic like some incredibly obese ballerina, floor-bound in the final subsidence of the Dying Swan.

"We like things to be nice," said Mrs Hatch.

She froze, holding up one finger, "Ah..."

The company watched, listened. None moved.

"I thought I heard it starting," said Mrs Hatch after several uneventful seconds. She was staring out the window. Her face was now decidedly strained.

"False alarm?" suggested Mr Beach, as cheerily as he thought was decent. Mrs Beach shushed him.

From somewhere in the depths of the house there sounded a peal of bells. It was repeated so quickly that some of the strikes clashed cacophonously. Mrs Hatch stepped quickly across to the window, frowning. "Oh, I do *wish* they wouldn't press it like that!"

She looked out. A car was double-parked against the others outside the house. It was an exceptionally large car.

Mrs Hatch hastened from window to door. On the way, she gave Mr Dampier-Small a tight smile of satisfaction and murmured to him: "It's Councillor Crispin; he's here now."

Somebody below evidently had opened the front door. Mrs Hatch called down from the landing: "Up here, Harry. Come on, before you miss it."

"Anybody would think," remarked Mrs Scorpe in a universally audible aside to Miss Cadbury: "that she'd got the Queen coming for cocoa."

Miss Cadbury's expression became even sterner. Flippancy in regard to the Royal Family was reprehensible enough in itself; employing it to belittle a lady whose husband made regular and sizeable contributions to the Kindly Kennel Klan was quite unforgivable.

Councillor Henry Norman Crispin, proprietor of Happyland, Brocklestone-on-Sea, chairman and shareholder in a north of England juke box company, and substantial owner of two medium-sized hotels on the coast, knew how to make an entrance.

After coming briskly through the doorway, he made a sudden halt, as if unprepared to find so many people in the room, and then stared intently and without haste at each in turn while a smile of mock disapprobation spread slowly over his face. This performance succeeded in conveying the impression of his having surprised them all in the midst of some kind of lewd revel.

Even Mrs Hatch was disconcerted for a moment. "We've been waiting for it to get dark," she explained.

Mr Crispin wordlessly signified that this he could well believe. Mrs Hatch blushed. "It ought to be working at any second now."

Crispin nodded familiarly at the Deputy Town Clerk and dispensed sly half-winks to Beach.

Maddox and Mrs Scorpe. Mrs Scorpe pretended not to like being winked at, but next time she raised her eyes to the ceiling she was looking pleased.

To Miss Cadbury he offered a formal "Good evening". She responded with dignity but no warmth. Councillor Crispin she considered, in her own phrase, "a lustful man". Had he been handsome also this would not have mattered so much. Miss Cadbury thought that good looks gave entitlement to a certain boldness of manner; just as warmbloodedness was understandable in the nobly born. Mr Crispin, alas, was ugly and the son of a Chalmersbury cattle drover. That he had made lots of money did not alter those basic facts so far as she was concerned.

"And what is it," inquired Mr Crispin of Mrs Hatch, "that ought to work at any second now?" He picked up one of the heavy cut crystal claret glasses in which the cocktails were being offered and squinted at it indulgently, as if knowing exactly how little it had cost. "Another of Arnie's little do-it-yourself gadgets?" He chuckled with the aid of some spare phlegm and glanced quickly round the company. "He's a great boy for public ceremonies, I'll say that for him."

"Just a few friends that might be interested," said Mrs Hatch coldly. "And the installation"—she lingered over the word—"was carried out by Scuffhams, as a matter of fact." An arch, absent-minded smile. "It's a long, long time since Arnold had a tool in his hand. My word, yes..."

She realised too late what a hostage she had offered Councillor Crispin's incorrigible vulgarity. He did not say anything. But he had no need to. The grin of comic condolence that turned his protuberant cheeks and chin, bulbous nose and plump jowls into the semblance of a squeezed-up ball of tennis balls was eloquent enough. "Oh, my God!" breathed the delighted Mrs Scorpe to herself.

Mr Beach felt the sharp prompting of his wife's shoe. He shot back his cuff and stared with exaggerated concern at his watch. "By jove!" he exclaimed, hoping thereby to discharge his responsibility.

His wife leaned towards Mrs Hatch. "Mr Beach understands electronic installations. Installations in banks tend to be tricky, you know. Perhaps you'd like him to cast an eye?"

Mrs Scorpe noted the immediate flicker of anxiety in the said eye. She hoped that the offer would be accepted. But Mrs Hatch shook her head.

"I'm afraid Scuffhams leave everything sealed up," she said. "They'll only allow their own experts to have anything to do with the control system. Well, of course, when equipment costs so much to install . . ."

"Best not to meddle with something one doesn't understand," Mr Maddox said. Having grown bored with waiting, he was polishing his spectacles upon the clean handkerchief he had taken from his breast pocket. "What they say about a shoemaker sticking to his last is still true today."

"Sticking to what?" asked Councillor Crispin.

"His last."

"His last what?"

Mr Maddox looked flustered. Reddening, he shrugged and gave his glasses another rub.

"Where's Arnie?" Crispin asked Mrs Hatch.

"He's in Newmarket." The reply was immediate and almost affable. "Mister Machonochie running on Friday. In the Pountney Stakes. Pountney—is that right?" She looked about her. "I can never remember these race names."

"It should be easy enough to remember the ones that nag of Arnie's has won." Crispin was grinning into the unresponsive face of Miss Cadbury and trying to offer her a cigar.

Mrs Hatch tilted her head a little and smiled forbearingly into the distance. "Mr Crispin," she said quietly and to no one in particular, "knows all there is to know about horses. So long as they're either going round in a fairground or on plates in the Neptune steak bar."

The owner of the Neptune Hotel—steak bar and all—suddenly hunched his shoulders and near

butted Miss Cadbury, who drew back in alarm. Some of his drink spilled on her flank, but then ran harmless droplets down the resilient wool of her costume. Mr Dampier-Small, instinctively chivalrous, offered her his handkerchief while contriving himself to move to a safer position. Everyone else stared and waited for Mr Crispin, whom they confidently assumed to be helpless in a fit of cholera, to launch himself upon his hostess.

Several seconds went by before they realised the truth. Mr Crispin's paroxysm had been occasioned simply by his having laughed in the middle of an inhalation of cigar smoke. Now he fetched a big growling sigh and flapped his hand.

"Christ, woman! You mustn't say things like that!"

He nipped the glowing end of his cigar between a finger and thumb hardened to horn by early years of thrift. He chuckled as he stuffed the butt into a waistcoat pocket.

"Aye, that poor bloody horse"—he was addressing the company at large, with a special look at Mrs Hatch now and again, as if to invite her expert corroboration—"that poor bloody horse—what is you call it again, Sophie? Mister MacWhatsitsname? Anyway, it used to belong to Joe O'Conlon, the bookie. That's right, isn't it Sophie? Yes, but here, wait a minute, do you know why Joe got rid of it? I'll tell you. The poor bloody brute was costing him thirty bob a week in aspirin. That's why. Crippled with arthritis, poor beast. Used to shovel aspirin down its throat through a funnel. Racehorse. Couldn't race itself to the knacker's yard."

There was a pause. Mrs Hatch patted her tight, blue-grey perm, then stroked the topmost of the three strands of pearls that rode her bosom. Her face, carefully averted from the slanderer of Mister Machonochie, was set in an expression of patient contempt.

"If Mr Crispin has quite finished," she murmured, "perhaps you'd care for some more refreshment." She looked with some puzzlement at the windows. "I'm sorry our little piece of resistance has decided to be awkward, though."

Mrs Scorpe echoed the phrase "piece de resistance" with malicious emphasis upon Mrs Hatch's anglicised pronunciation.

Having shaken the green bottle and found that it was more nearly empty than she had expected, Mrs Hatch stood on tip-toes and looked across heads. "Has anyone seen Mr Amis?" She caught the blank look on the face of the Deputy Town Clerk. "My husband's private secretary," she explained. Mr Dampier-Small shook his head.

"*Secretary*. God help us!" Mrs Scorpe's capacity for sardonic repetition seemed inexhaustible. Hard-mouthed, Mrs Hatch turned upon her.

"Did you say something, Vera?"

"Who, me?" Mrs Scorpe offered a smile like a cut throat. Mrs Hatch looked away hastily.

She went out of the room and to the head of the staircase. She called down.

"Are you there, Edmund?"

A door opened somewhere. She waited until there appeared at the turn of the stairs a slim, fastidious-looking man of about thirty, wearing a formal grey suit. He peered upward. His bearing seemed calculated, like the pose of a photographic model. Two fingers of his left hand rested delicately upon the stair rail. "Did you want me, Mrs Hatch?"

"It looks as if we've exhausted our White Ladies. Would you mind seeing if there's another bottle? It will either be in Mr Hatch's study or else in the kitchen. Near the bread bin."

"Very well, Mrs Hatch."

"Oh, and Edmund..."

"Yes, Mrs Hatch?"

She leaned low over the banisters and whispered hoarsely: "I'm not sure, but I think that you know-what has gone wrong."

“No!” Pain and regret were pictured instantly in Amis’s face. “Oh, I *am* sorry.”

~~—He walked out of sight down the hall. She heard cans and bottles being moved about in the kitchen. He returned almost at once and came far enough up the stairs to hand her a second quart cocktail mixture.~~

“I do think it’s a shame.” He indicated the bedroom door with a nod. “Especially when you asked friends round.”

Mrs Hatch shrugged as she took the bottle. “Oh, I haven’t given up yet. It’s a brighter evening than yesterday. That’s probably the reason.”

“It *is* brighter. Oh, yes, decidedly.” Amis looked at his wristwatch. “Which explains why I’m still here. I hadn’t noticed the time.”

With a beam of gratitude for his attempt to reassure her, Mrs Hatch turned on the stair and went back to her guests.

By dramatic coincidence, the hush that succeeded her re-entry was pierced by a metallic *ping*.

“Ah!” cried Mrs Hatch. She raised her hand.

The thin whine of an electric motor.

“That’s it!” whispered Mrs Hatch. Her face registered something akin to the ecstasy of a rewarded bird-watcher. One finger crooked to direct the company’s gaze.

In slow, simultaneous, steady progression across the biggest bedroom window in Partney Avenue moved eight heavy satin brocade curtains, each extending across its appointed area of glass until the last split of pale daylight was obliterated. For a moment or two, everyone stared helplessly in absolute darkness. Then the motor’s little song died and there was a second *ping*. Opalescent panels set in the wall behind the bed came to life in a raspberry glow. There was a sudden murmur of admiration.

“It *is* rather pretty, isn’t it?” said Mrs Hatch. She, too, was glowing.

Chapter Three

“You were right, Love. That creep Hubert was there. Bloody little ponce.”

Councillor Crispin bawled the information back under his left arm. Jacketless and up-sleeved, he was bending low over the pink porcelain sink unit in the kitchen and sluicing water from cupped hands over his red, knobbly face.

In the adjoining dining-room, Mr Crispin’s housekeeper smiled as she sorted out fish knives and forks from a big case of presentation cutlery. “Said so, didn’t I?” She breathed upon one of the knives and polished it on her hip.

“Council officials,” said Mr Crispin through the towel, “ought to know better than go toutin’ around at private parties. They’re supposed to be above that sort of bloody thing.”

Mrs Millicent Spain nodded primly as she measured with her eye the spacing of the knife and fork upon one of the table mats before her. The mats were rectangles of cork-based plastic that formed a set of illustrations of scenes from Dickens. The one she had put in Mr Crispin’s place showed the Death of Little Nell. His favourite, as she knew, was the Cratchitts’ Christmas Dinner, but Mrs Spain was convinced that it was over-fondness for his own wares that had carried off her butcher husband two years before and she had no intention of being deprived of bed and board a second time if she could forestall that eventuality by healthy suggestion.

Mr Crispin came through from the kitchen, tugging down his shirt sleeves. He was grinning at memory. “Bugger me, you should have seen old Vera.”

“Vera?”

~~“Vera Scorpe. She looked like a lady deacon at a farting contest. Christ! If looks could kill.”~~

He moved behind Mrs Spain on his way across the room and with absent-minded affection squeezed one of her breasts while with his other hand he sorted out whisky from the half dozen bottles on the sideboard. She nudged away his grasp, but not immediately.

“What’s for tea, then?”

“Dinner,” corrected Mrs Spain. “Fish. Well, you can see I’ve set for fish. A nice piece of baked cod.”

Mr Crispin made his lips look as if he was going to say “fish” again but he remained silent. He poured quickly a very full glass of whisky, then sat down near the window.

“Let me guess,” said Mrs Spain, “who else was there.” She pondered a moment, while stroking gently the place lately invested by her employer’s hand. “I know—that awful Cadbury woman from the dogs’ home.”

“Right.”

“Yes, well, she’s easy. If she doesn’t keep to heel she doesn’t get Arnie Hatch’s subs. What about that fellow from the hotel in East Street, though—nervous man with glasses and a bossy wife—Maddox. I’ll bet they turned up.”

Mr Crispin chuckled. “Aye, they bloody well did. Of course, he’s still after the drinks contract at Arnie’s club. He’s wasting his bloody time, though; I know that for a fact.”

“I wonder,” said Mrs Spain, on her way into the kitchen, “that those two haven’t more pride. Of course, she was a Hatch herself before she was married. You knew that, didn’t you?”

Crispin grunted. He heard the sound of an oven opening and dishes being set down. He sniffed cautiously and with distaste, then thrust his nose into the sanctuary of whisky fumes.

“I remember all the trouble there was over her uncle’s will,” called Mrs Spain. “Amy Maddox was to have got that coin collection of his. They reckoned it was worth over £1000. But it never came to her. It went to Arnie in the end. They never forgave him, Amy and her husband. Yet there they go—sucking up to *her*.”

“Who?” Crispin tried to sound interested.

Mrs Spain’s big, gaunt face appeared in the doorway, wreathed in fishy steam from the casserole she carried.

“What do you mean, *who*? *Her*, of course. That awful wife of his. Sophie.” She set down the casserole as grimly as if it contained a human head. “And don’t sit there letting this get cold.”

Crispin obeyed the summons without demur. After a lifetime of what more conventional domesticated residents of Flaxborough termed his “arsing around with anything in skirts”, he had found a sort of peace in the discipline imposed by the widow of butcher Spain. She was not strained in any moral sense. Indeed, their relationship had begun with a tipsy seduction scene in the upstairs room of “Penny’s Pantry” only an hour after meeting each other at the wedding reception of a mutual friend. Millicent adopted much the same attitude to sex as her late husband had shown to men: one of acceptance, appreciation and businesslike dispatch. Around the house, though, she zealously indulged a love of order, of routine, of propriety, that would have much irked any man already familiar with such matters. Crispin was not. Domestic disorder had always been for him the norm. Now life was crowded with niceties and conceits. Contrary to every expectation of himself and his friends, he found himself actually enjoying them. The transformation had cost him a lot, certainly. But he had made money in the last twenty years like a man shovelling gravel. There was enough to satisfy the social aspirations of ten Millicents. And what, he asked himself in response to her diligent tutelage, was money for if not to secure the benefits of gracious living?

He ate the fish quickly, although it proved more palatable than he had feared. For sweet, M

Spain produced an orange-flavoured mousse with whipped cream. Mr Crispin enjoyed it very much. He reflected that Mrs Spain was a treasure, and cast around in his mind for the sort of observation that would please her.

“They reckon,” he said at last, gazing reflectively at his well-licked spoon, “that old Arnie trying to sell back that bloody great water bed, or whatever it’s called.”

“But they only bought it in March.” Mrs Spain flipped out the information on the instant. “They had to have special girders fitted. And plumbing.”

“Aye, well, they’ll have to have them *unfitted*. Old Arnie’s had enough. Every time he and Sophie have some nutty he’s bloody sea-sick.”

“Harry! Don’t be so disgusting.”

Mr Crispin felt that small warm blow-back that rewards the giver of pleasure. He looked at Millicent’s face. It was set in a frown and she was eating with so little movement of muscle that she might merely have been nibbling a stray fish bone. She swallowed and said:

“If you ask me, they haven’t done anything of *that* kind for a very long while.”

“How would you know?” Crispin sounded genuinely interested.

“Ah.”

“Go on then, girl. Tell me.”

She unhurriedly gathered together their used dishes. “It’s not a subject I care to discuss.”

He shrugged and turned his chair at right-angles. There was a leather cigar case on a silkwood coffee table a few feet away. He stretched out a leg and hooked the table towards him. Mrs Spain rose and fetched an enormous ashtray from the end of the sideboard. It was a hollowed out quartz octagon more than twelve inches across.

“If you must know,” said Mrs Spain, with studied casualness—Crispin smirked at the end of his cigar before suddenly biting it off—“Mrs Harper who used to do the cleaning at that so-called house of theirs, including the so-called bedroom, told me.”

“Told you what?” asked Crispin, confused less perhaps by the invoking of Mrs Harper than by the implications of “so-called”.

“Her son’s a policeman. Mrs Harper’s son, I mean. And she used to get her meat from us when we had the shop. She reckoned that the Hatches hadn’t, well, you know, all the time she’s been working for them.”

“Yes, but bloody hell, they wouldn’t have asked *her* to watch, would they?”

“Harry, you’re just pretending not to understand. I mean, when people—well, when they behave in a certain way, there are signs left. Usually, anyway. And people can tell when they look afterwards.”

“If they know what to look for.” Crispin drew flame into his cigar without taking his eyes off Mrs Spain’s face.

“I think we’ve said quite enough on the subject.”

Crispin extinguished his match with a great smoke-laden sigh. Gruffly, he cleared his throat. “Come here, girl.”

Mrs Spain hesitated, then came to stand beside his chair, stiffly upright and with tight mouth. She held in her hands the cloth with which she had been polishing the Scenes from Dickens. In the friendliest manner imaginable, Mr Crispin slipped his left hand beneath her skirt and cupped it round that half of Mrs Spain’s bottom which presented itself most conveniently to his attention.

“Mrs Harper,” he told her quietly, “might have a son who’s a copper, but whatever she told you about Arnie and his missus is a load of fanny. Sophie’s just the sort of scheming cow who’d keep a clean nightie specially to put out every morning if she thought the hired help was taking any notice. You know what Sophie’s after, don’t you? The bloody magistrates’ bench.”

“A fine so-called magistrate *that* one would make!” exclaimed Mrs Spain, abandoning in the

emotion of the moment her attempt to disengage from Crispin's embrace. "There's more than one in this town remember how she was always having to be brought back from that Polish air force camp out at Strawbridge."

Reminiscence gleamed redly in the eye of ex-combatant Crispin. "Remember that tale about the Poles, girl? We were always hearing of women being taken to hospital with their tits chewed off." He pondered, sighed. "Now it's Kit-e-Kat and Chinese restaurants."

"What I can't understand is how she had the face to invite *us* to see her ridiculous curtain gadget. As if it was the unveiling of a war memorial or something. You should have taken no notice. Got nowhere near."

"You got me to ask them round for sherry when we had the portico built."

"Yes, but not specially to *see* it. That was just coincidence."

Mr Crispin retrieved the hand from beneath Mrs Spain's skirt in order to scratch his own thigh. He smiled.

"Bloody nearly bust his gut pretending not to notice it was there. Remember? Not that Arnold would know the difference between a portico and a pisspot."

"There's no call to be crude, Harry. You'll be taken as no better than they are, if you're not careful."

He pulled a face of mock contrition.

"No, what I can't forgive," went on Mrs Spain, "was her looking at the pillars and asking when the builders were going to take the scaffolding poles away. Sarcastic cat. Of course, she'd never got over the way we made them look silly over that so-called swimming pool of theirs."

"It must have cost him a bloody bomb, having to extend it like that."

Crispin tugged happily at his nose in recollection. The Hatches, outdone in swimming pool acreage, had been obliged not only to demolish a greenhouse but to sacrifice several feet of tennis court in order to establish parity. What made the affair even more satisfactory was the tendency shown after only a few weeks, of the older and newer halves of the pool to take part in a sort of continental drift, the result of which was a leakage so considerable that water had to be hosed continuously at full pressure. Crispin, as member of the General Purposes Committee of Flaxborough Council, was greatly looking forward to hotter weather and its justification of his moving a general hosepipe ban. That would send the bloody tide out, all right.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you..."

Mrs Spain went to the sideboard and took a piece of paper from a drawer. "Somebody from the firm at Chalmsbury rang up today." She looked at a note she had written. "Half-past ten in the morning—that's when they're coming to put the Barbecue Barn up."

Mr Crispin rubbed his hands. "Oh, marvellous!" He made to reach for the paper she held. "They know which one, don't they? I don't want a cock-up."

Mrs Spain peered at the paper, then handed it to him. It was an illustrated brochure. She pointed. "That one. 'The Old Kentucky',"

"Fine."

"I still think that's prettier, Harry." Mrs Spain's finger moved to "Ye Olde Trysting Place". "It says it's got thatch as an optional extra."

"Thatch my arse. It's not fitted for gas, girl; that's the point. Ours will have a proper barbecue stove built in."

Mrs Spain did not argue the point further. She shrugged, a little sadly, then remembered something else.

"Titch Blossom rang just before you came in," she said. "About the car. Something to do with the lights."

“That’s right. The Merc. What did he say?”

“He’ll pick it up first thing tomorrow.”

“O.K. I’ll take the Jag, then.”

Mrs Spain frowned. “What’s he going to do to the lights? They’re all right, aren’t they?”

“Sure. I’m just having some extra quartz-iodines fitted.”

“And what are they when they’re at home?”

“Headlights, my old darling. Just headlights. But extra special ones.” He lunged good-humoured with open palms. “Like yours!”

Mrs Spain stepped back hastily, crossing her arms like Joan of Arc. She glanced out of the window at a dark and deserted Arnhem Crescent.

“One of these days, Harry Crispin,” she said, “you’ll do something when people are looking. And then you’ll be in trouble.”

Chapter Four

Mister Machonochie was always described in the local paper as “belonging to the Flaxborough stable of Mr Arnold Hatch, the well-known business man and club owner”.

The horse had never, in fact, been within thirty miles of Flaxborough. There was neither racing nor hunting land anywhere in the county, whose arable acres were far too profitable to be played with. “Stable”, in the context of Mister Machonochie, was merely a courtesy term, a journalistic abstraction. The animal was actually domiciled in a village near Newmarket, where for £20 a week a friendly trainer provided shelter and keep on condition that he was not expected to exercise it in company with his own animals, which he feared might thereby be infected with Mister Machonochie’s chronic lethargy (not arthritis, as Councillor Crispin had slanderously alleged).

This lodging arrangement was doubly convenient. The horse could be entered for an occasional race at the handy Newmarket course, thus maintaining Hatch’s status as racehorse owner without placing on the beast the unwarrantable extra strain of being transported around the country. And, as Newmarket was within an hour’s car ride from Flaxborough, Hatch could get over often enough to be pictured in the *Citizen* patting the nose of “Flaxborough’s hope for the Pountney Stakes” early each May and stroking the neck of the “local fancy for the Bruce Montgomery Handicap” in October.

In this year’s Pountney, Mister Machonochie had cantered home an easy eighth. After allowing it to rest near the post and get its breath back, Hatch gave it the large piece of crystallised pineapple procured for the occasion by his wife (whose interest in the turf did not extend to actually stepping out of it) and, committing the animal to the care of the friendly trainer for another six months, he made his way to the owners’ car park.

Arnold Hatch’s car was called a Fairway Executive. It was fitted with a refrigerator, a duplicating machine and a telephone.

Hatch slung into a corner of the back seat his race-going equipment: a light tweed topcoat, binoculars, shooting stick, and the cap that Councillor Crispin called his Ratcatcher’s Special. Removal of the cap displayed hair the colour of yellowing linen. It looked the kind of hair that would persist, unthinning, until death. It complemented the healthy pink skin of the face, the calm pale blue eyes, lightly fringed with almost white lashes, and the eyebrows of the same colour that seemed to have been deliberately selected as accessories of taste.

The face, one would have thought, of a man of wealth and discrimination and power; of a merchant banker, say, or a slum landlord of the older, better sort.

The voice did not match.

“Eddie? Is that you, Eddie? This is Mister Hatch talking. I’m at the racecourse as of now...aye, the racecourse... You what?... No, he didn’t. The going was wrong for him after all that rain. Anyway, what I want you to do is to ring the missus at her sister’s and tell her I’ll be back in the morning. Another thing. I’d like you to call at the house tomorrow at about ten. I’ve a special little job for you. Right, then. This is Mister Hatch over and out.”

He hesitated before replacing the phone, as if uncertain of the rightness of the farewell phrase. Then he settled himself upon the genuine calf of the specially built-up driving seat (Hatch was, Councillor Crispin’s lamentable vocabulary, a short-arse) and started the motor.

The hotel at which he always stayed on his excursions in the role of racehorse owner was not, in general, patronised by racing men. Mr Hatch found this satisfactory for two reasons. He was not inconvenienced by seasonal crush. And he was spared the indignity of being associated by the company with an animal that had sense neither of duty nor of occasion.

After an early dinner, he saw and acknowledged in the lounge a man called Baxter. They ordered whiskies and lit cigars. Baxter smoked his with determination and obvious enjoyment. Hatch drew upon his just often enough to maintain its life; the action seemed one of charity, judicious and economical.

The previous evening, Baxter, who claimed to be the director of two companies in the field of food manufacture, had spoken enthusiastically of the benefits that his firms had derived from the advice of a business efficiency consultant. He now expanded the theme.

“These fellows can see the whole thing in a fresh way from the outside. I used to think it was just a gimmick, but it’s really marvellous what they can put a finger on profitwise and efficiencywise. They go right through the whole set-up—factories, sales department, social welfare, personnel—to management and all, they don’t spare the likes of us, old man. And they beaver on with their little sliderules and work out how much percentagewise the chocolate biscuit production drops when the mix manager’s wife has to wait an extra six months for a new coat. Oh, you can smile, old man (Hatch was not, in fact) but it all adds up viabilitywise, it really does. Well, you wouldn’t get the really big boys—IBM and Shell and Vesco and so on—doing consultancy budgetising if it didn’t pay off.”

Hatch agreed that this was a sensible deduction. Baxter seemed an eminently sensible man, even if he did have a plummy, booming voice that proclaimed, or so Hatch thought, education at a posh school.

“Funny, really, that you should have brought this up,” Hatch said, looking at his cigar to see if it needed any more oxygen just yet, “because if I recall rightly I’ve a note on my diary at the office to give instructions on this very subject to my private secretary.”

“You don’t say!” Baxter quickly sluiced down his surprise with what remained of his whisky. “Another?” He indicated Hatch’s glass. Hatch drank up. Baxter stretched and peered across the lounge as if it were the Gobi desert. Detecting a waiter, he raised his arm, made snapping noises with his fingers.

The waiter stared back with mild interest for half a minute or so, then made leisurely approach. He looked at Baxter’s hand.

“I like yer castanets, mate. Wotcher do next—dance on yer soddin’ ’at?”

“This gentleman and I,” said Baxter, coldly and carefully, “would like two whiskies, please. Doubles, if you would be so good.”

When the waiter had ambled away, tractable but unimpressed, Baxter said: “Fucking peasant.”

“Aye,” said Hatch, glad that Baxter was able so quickly to sound at ease again.

They resumed their conversation. Hatch said that it was his intention to instruct his private secretary to get him the facts about these business efficiency organisations.

Management consultants, actually, Baxter amended.

Yes, well, that might be so, but what Hatch wanted was to know which was the top firm, the best—~~“No argument about that,”~~ replied Baxter. ~~“Mackintosh-Brooke. By a mile. It’s *the* one. On~~ question is”—he puffed out shiny, blue-grey, cheeks—“whether for what you have in mind it isn’t well, too pricey, if you don’t mind my talking frankly. MB do come expensive, sure. On the other hand, they’re American and they’re the best.”

Their fresh drinks arrived. They were brought not by the waiter, but by a girl from the bar in the next room. She was round-faced, plump, and eager to please. After setting down the two glasses, she wiped her hand down one thigh in a long, slow, preening gesture and smiled dewily at both men as she turned while she waited for the money.

Baxter leaned far back in his chair, turning a little sideways as he delved into his trousers pocket with his right hand. With the left he grasped his crotch. This burrowing for coin was so laborious that sweat shone on Baxter’s forehead, now bright red. He stared all the time into the girl’s face.

“These what d’you call them, these consultants,” Hatch said, pretending not to notice Baxter’s overtures. “What exactly do they offer?”

“An analysis,” Baxter said. He extricated his hand at last. The coins it held were not enough. With a facility that was almost conjuror-like after the struggle with his trousers, he produced a slim black wallet and slicked from it a note.

“When I say analysis, though,” went on Baxter, looking not at Hatch but at the girl, “I think what they mean is something pretty elaborate. They talk about a study of management problems.” He waved away the girl’s offer to give change. She bobbed her thanks and turned. Both men watched the departure of a prettily undulating rump. “I’d say we’d be all right there tonight,” said Baxter. He sounded hungry.

“Management problems, you said,” Hatch prompted.

Baxter made a growling sound as the girl disappeared round a partition that separated the lounge from the bar. He gave Hatch attention again with his small, speculative eyes. “Sorry about that, old man. Where were we? Problems...” He took a gulp of whisky.

“Of management.”

“Yeah—sure. Mind you, when these people talk of management, they mean right across the board. Design of products. Profitability. Marketing. Public relations. All that. And personnel. Personnel—hellishly important.”

“But it’s only the really big firms that find it worth while to hire these consultants, surely. Isn’t what they do some kind of time and motion lark? I mean, they can dress it up, but that’s what it isn’t it.”

Baxter’s smile proclaimed a vast worldly knowledge, leavened with tolerance and a desire to help others. “Look,” he said quietly, “I don’t have to tell you that businesswise everything must either get bigger or just fold up. To get big, you’ve got to have efficiency. You and I think we know what efficiency it. But we don’t. We’re too close in.”

Hatch set his lips in a pout of shrewd understanding. At the same time, he noticed both glasses were empty. He pushed the bell button in the wall beside him.

“What *is* your line, if you don’t mind my asking,” said Baxter.

“I diversify a good deal,” replied Hatch, using a word that he had heard, liked and stored away a couple of weeks previously.

Baxter nodded emphatically. “You’re bloody wise, old man. Bloody wise.” Then, quite suddenly, his gaze became blank. With his little finger he stroked his thin, black, meticulously trimmed moustache.

The girl from the bar came round the partition. A round tray dangled at the end of her long, carelessly held arm. She put the tray on their table and leaned low to collect the glasses. A whi

liquidity of breast swung lazily in the dark tent of her dress.

~~“It would give two lonely travellers great pleasure, dear lady, if you would be so kind as to bring them two-fold potations of the Highland spirit.”~~ Baxter capped his recitation with a grin of grotesque bonhomie.

“Two similar, sir?” She stood upright.

“Whatever you say, dear lady.” Baxter patted the back of the girl’s thigh. She turned, but not evasively, so that the withdrawal of Baxter’s hand was more like a caress.

When she was nearly but not quite out of hearing, Baxter made his animal growling noise again. Hatch regarded him dubiously but said nothing.

The conversation about business consultants petered out. Baxter was much preoccupied. He drank more whiskies, swallowing them as if conscientiously pursuing a course of therapy. By the fourth round, he had made the delightful discovery that the girl from the bar was quite unprejudiced in the matter of having her bottom fondled.

Hatch saw that his companion would, at any moment now, offer some specious remark about having an early night and trundle away to work his claim.

“Watch it,” said Hatch. His tone, though still friendly, was brusque.

Baxter frowned, grinned, frowned again. “How d’you mean, old man?” He was swaying very slightly backward and forward in his chair.

“You think she fancies you, don’t you?”

“Well, Christ, you could see for yourself. I mean, I’m not going to pass that up, not bloody likely.”

Baxter wiped his palms on his thighs. He gazed towards the bar partition like a lumberjack sizing up his next tree.

“You’ll keep clear of that one if you know what’s good for you,” said Hatch.

Slyness tilted Baxter’s grin. “Jealous?”

“Don’t be daft. I know who she is, that’s all. She and her boy friend work the mugs.”

“I like her and I love her little arse,” declared Baxter. Suddenly he scowled. “Boy friend? What boy friend?”

“He’s one of the porters here. Him and Sal run a little arrangement between themselves. Ever heard of Loopy Loo?”

“Sort of nursery rhyme thing, isn’t it? Christ, *I* don’t know.”

“‘Here we come loopy loo...’ Aye.” Hatch smiled reflectively. “You’d not like it.”

“What is this, a leg pull or something?” Baxter was showing the petulance of the slightly drunk.

Hatch chuckled, but checked his amusement at once. “No, no, I’m being absolutely serious. It could be a bit risky to go into details here and now, but what it amounts to is that you’d get cleaned out of money and for damn all. I think it’s what they call a heist in America.”

For several seconds, Baxter stared down in silence at the table. He fingered and tugged at a cheek. “The rotten bloody bitch,” he said quietly, more in wonderment than rancour. Then, after further reflection, “Hell, I’m not going to be imposed upon. I will not be imposed upon. Tell you what...” The birth of a splendid idea shone in his eyes. “We’ll share. Take turns. That’ll take care of this boy friend or whatever he is.” Cunningly he wagged a finger. “He won’t expect a rear-guard.”

Hatch waited for Baxter’s giggle to subside. “Look,” he said, “if you just want a young lady tucked in with for the night, you don’t have to stay here and get robbed. I can take you somewhere where there’s proper arrangements, all nice and comfortable, and a young lady with a bit of tone. As a matter of fact”—Hatch stood and brushed the lapel of his jacket with his fingertips—“I wouldn’t say no to a nice bit of something on the side myself just this once.”

He began to make his way unhurriedly across the room.

Baxter got up, swayed in puzzlement for a moment, then followed.

~~He had almost reached the door when the girl Hatch had called Sal came into the room by the b~~
entrance. Baxter halted, drew breath and crooked his finger as if to summon a recalcitrant infant.

“Hey!” Harsh, angry. Heads turned.

Hatch stood in the doorway, looking back anxiously.

Cautiously and without a smile, the girl approached to within five or six feet. Baxter urged her closer with impatient clawing gestures. She glanced questioningly at Hatch.

Baxter, too, threw Hatch a look, but it was of triumph. To the girl he said, very loudly: “A word has been said to the wise, dear lady, and the wise has taken heed, so you can sling your little titties elsewhere and play loopy loo all by your little bloody self!” He paused, as if mustering some finer crushing indignity, but this proved to be merely a repetition of “Dear lady”, very sarcastically uttered.

Hatch seized his arm and hastened him out.

“That wasn’t very sensible of you.”

Baxter did not argue the point, but he considered his nice new friend was being unnecessarily sensitive.

Chapter Five

Baxter slept deeply all the way to Flaxborough, which they reached just before ten o’clock. Before lapsing into unconsciousness, he had pronounced the Fairway Executive “absolutely top-hole”. Hatch took this expression of enthusiasm to be further evidence of Baxter’s superior—perhaps even aristocratic—upbringing. He beguiled part of the journey with contriving means of showing off to the managing director of Sucro-wip Products to Councillor Henry Crispin.

Skirting the broad forecourt of the Floradora, Hatch turned behind the club building and slid the Fairway into his private car port. The forecourt, he had noticed, was closely packed with cars. It nearly always was at this time of night. The club had been a winner from the start.

The original house, a mouldering mansion with fourteen bedrooms and a set of stables just outside the town boundary on Hunting’s Lane, had been the hereditary burden of one of the less well-heeled families of landed gentry in those parts until Arnold Hatch, philanthropist, relieved them of it for what he termed “rubble value”—£300 cash—in 1963. Seven years later, by an interestingly deviant manipulation of mortgages, sub-contracts, promissory instruments, share exchanges, hints and threats, he was the owner—at no extra expense whatsoever to himself—of splendidly-appointed premises that fulfilled a never before suspected public need and were the pride and wonder of the town.

He took Baxter on an outside tour of inspection.

“Those lights,” he said. “We keep them on all night, sometimes all day. Just as well to let people know you’re in business. They think the better of you for a bit of display.”

A battery of golden floods gave the front of the building, rich in imitation half-timbering, the appearance of having been doused in maple syrup.

“The missus designed the name-board,” Hatch explained. “She’s mad on flowers. They’re a sort of theme of the club, as a matter of fact; you know—a motive.”

Baxter gazed admiringly at Mrs Hatch’s creation, the word Floradora across the central façade in letters more than a foot high.

Hatch pointed.

“The first letter—that’s made in forget-me-nots, you see? F for forget-me-nots. Then I think the

next one's lavender. Or lupins, perhaps. You can pick them out better in daylight. The R's roses. Daffodils. She took a lot of trouble over it."

"Top-hole!" Baxter exclaimed softly.

"The windows on that side," said Hatch, "belong to the Wassail Hall. That's an idea that people have taken to in a big way. Medieval banquets. They come from all over for those."

Baxter, whose inclination to venery had been in no degree diminished by sleep, was beginning to wonder if he had placed too hopeful an interpretation upon Hatch's reference to young ladies. At the moment, it seemed that proprietorial pride was his sole emotion.

"We give them a dagger each to eat their capon with, and a bottle of mulled sack..."

"Sack?"

"Aye. Well, it's a sort of modern equivalent. Everybody gets a tankard or a goblet. You see those end windows?"

"Yes."

"That's where the minstrels' gallery is. I tell you what..." Hatch looked at his watch. "We can go in that way. There'll be no one there just now."

Only one central light shone in the Wassail Hall. It showed a lofty room capable of seating perhaps 150 people on rough-hewn trestle forms. Set in the wall at the further end was a small rail enclosure, some twelve feet above the ground, the minstrels' gallery. Baxter saw the glint of a drum kit, wires, an amplifier.

Hatch nudged his arm and pointed to a board just below the gallery.

"Gentles, pray hurl ye no bones at ye minstrelles."

Baxter grinned.

There were other notices, all in Gothic script.

"Comforte chamber for ye dames." Another for "ye Esquires".

"Mine Hoste bids welcome to All Goodlie Folk from Ye Tobackow Colonies of Americay!"

"The Yanks love that one," Hatch said. "They've a grand sense of fun. One of them told me he'd come all the way from Milwaukee just to see the serving wenches. He said he'd heard back home that they were all descended from Nell Gwynn, but that was just his joke, I expect. On account of the costume."

"I expect so," said Baxter. It was with considerable relief that he saw Hatch turn and lead the way to a small door marked "Private: No Varlets allowed".

By means of corridors, they were able to avoid the bars and the gaming section, until they reached a room that seemed to have been designed as a compromise between office and boudoir. It contained a desk of white maple with gilded drawer handles, two small arm chairs covered in floral cotton, a miniature pinewood dresser, a tallboy that could have been (and was) a filing cabinet, a sofa and a whimsically rather than seriously designed as a Victorian work basket, a safe.

On the dresser tea things were set. A woman sat at the desk. She was softly blowing the surface of the cup of tea held close to her mouth. Her eyes regarded Hatch and Baxter through the steam for several seconds before she put the cup down, revealing a fleshy, high-complexioned face that had collapsed a little through too early adoption of false teeth, but was lively and by no means unattractive.

"Mabs, this is Mr Baxter. He's an executive friend of mine."

Hatch introduced the woman as Mrs Margaret Shooter, manageress of the club's motel section.

Baxter looked impressed. "I didn't know there was a motel here, as well."

Mrs Shooter looked at Hatch, who said: "Well, there is, and there isn't, if you follow me. We've got half a dozen overnight chalets more or less ready for occupation, but we're not officially in business yet."

“The project isn’t finalised,” Baxter translated.

~~“Aye, that’s it, exactly. Anyway, take the weight off your legs, and Mabs’ll find us a drink, won’t you, girl?”~~

Mrs Shooter produced whisky, vodka and gin with the air of a perennially youthful aunt, expert in the art of providing audacious treats. She smiled warmly and often upon Mr Baxter, who found himself simpering and shrugging like a callow youth. He liked Mrs Shooter tremendously; she was cuddlesome and sympathetic, and yet stimulatingly cheeky. She moved in a cloud of perfume that made him think of bath-water-borne breasts: white, soapy whales. He did not mind at all her addressing him as “son”. It was even flattering, in a way. Soon he was calling her “Mabs” and accepting as perfectly natural her habit of squeezing the inside of his thigh every time she wished to emphasise something or to encourage him to laugh.

Hatch said: “Bill here wanted to get off to bed tonight with Sally Hoylake.”

Mrs Shooter’s amazement wrought an owl-like transformation: her eyes vastly enlarged and her mouth pouted into a beak. “Oo-hooo-hooo! Slip-knot Sal! Hooo...!”

Hatch smiled. “He didn’t want to take any notice of me.”

Another hoot from Mrs Shooter. Then she grabbed and held Baxter’s knee. “Good job you did it though, isn’t it, son? Christ, yes!”

Baxter hoped that somebody would tell him just what he had escaped from, without his having to ask.

Mrs Shooter, still affectionately grasping his knee, had half turned and was talking to Hatch.

“Funny how young Sal went nasty in that way. Different again from her mother. We were very close, her mum and me. We were in Broad Street in those days.” She burrowed under the lee of her left breast and scratched ruminatively. “We both worked at the old doctor’s place until he got taken off, poor old chap.¹ Now there”—she peered earnestly at Baxter—“was one of nature’s gentlemen. Every blessed inch of him.”

¹ Reported in *Coffin Scarcely Used*

Hatch explained briskly. “Doctor Hillyard, she’s talking about. Dead now—died in prison, actually. Bit of a local scandal.” He frowned and gave a private little shake of the head to warn Baxter that Mrs Shooter might find further reminiscence painful.

“What’s loopy loo?” Baxter asked.

Mrs Shooter emerged from sad reflection with another of her high-humoured hoots. “Hey, didn’t you tell him?” she asked Hatch.

“I didn’t want him to tangle with Tony.”

She nodded. “Very wise.” Then she hitched herself forward in her chair and smoothed her capacious lap, in the manner of someone about to tell a bedtime story. Baxter noticed for the first time how white and shapely were her arms, how sensuous her style of moving them.

“Loopy loo,” began Mrs Shooter, “is a very nasty, mean trick, son, and it just shows how careful you’ve got to be these days. Now, then, we’ll suppose for the sake of argument that I’m Sally Hoylake and that gentleman”—she indicated Hatch—“is Tony Grapelli, which you’ll understand is the name of Sal’s business manager. And suppose—just for the sake of argument, of course—that you fancy a nice little gallop, if you follow my meaning, and that you give me the wink that I’m under starter’s orders...”

She paused, as if to satisfy herself that Baxter grasped the hypothesis, however fantastic.

“Right. So what I do is to go along on the quiet to Mr Hatch here, so that he can make arrangements in good time. He’s on the hotel staff, you see, so he has the run of the place and can get

into rooms. You follow my meaning?

“When you’ve had a few more drinks, I slip away with you and off we go to the bedroom where I’ve led you on to believe that intimacy will take place, but what actually happens is this—and I hope you’ll not be embarrassed, because I can’t explain properly without being a little bit personal.” She turned. “Can I, Mr Hatch?”

“Mr Baxter’s a man of the world, I think, Mabs.”

“Oh, I *am* glad.” She patted Baxter’s thigh in the manner of an affectionate dog fancier. “I wouldn’t like you to be offended, son. Anyway, to cut a long story short, we get into bed in a fully unclothed state and with the light out and I permit certain liberties that I don’t have to describe but you know what I mean, and anyway they’re just to encourage you while I reach under the pillow for what Tony—or Mr Hatch, rather—has put there ready.

“The next thing you know, son, is that I’ve got hold of your little old member of parliament and you think, well, it’s only nature and very nice, too, and when you hear me whistle you take it as a compliment.

“But it isn’t, son. It’s my signal to Mr Hatch down there under the window, which he’s left a little bit open. And before you know what’s happened, that noose’s run tight on your little old m.p. and you’re out of bed and being reeled in like a bloody salmon.”

There was silence. Then Baxter muttered “Christ!” and took a swig of whisky.

“A very nasty trick,” said Mrs Shooter, solemnly. Tucking in her chin, she squinted down at her bosom and brushed away a crumb.

“What would she...I mean, what would you do after that?” Baxter inquired.

“Oh, just take my time, son. Put my clothes back on. Go through your pockets and your luggage. Then goodnight and thank you very much and out. There’s nothing you’d be able to do. Mr Hatch here would have hauled you tight up against the window, you see, and given his end of the cord a couple of turns round something handy to keep you anchored.”

Baxter paled a little.

Mrs Shooter gave his leg a reassuring slap. “Mind you, he’d cast off once he knew I was clear. Mr Hatch would, I mean, because he’s a gentleman. I can’t speak for Tony, though. Very spiteful, is Tony. He reckons to be a stable lad by trade, but they’ll not let him among the horses.”

Another ten minutes passed in pleasant small talk over fresh drinks, Mrs Shooter having switched from tea to gin in order to be sociable. Baxter judged her relationship with Hatch to be professional and correct, yet amiable. He felt sad that Sucro-wip Products had failed to attract managerial material of comparable attractiveness.

“The real reason for our calling,” Hatch said at last, “is that we’re both feeling a bit in need of a sniff at the flowers.”

Mrs Shooter smiled indulgently. Baxter supposed that one of their private jokes was in the air.

“Your Lily’s at liberty,” said Mrs Shooter to Hatch. “And what about Daisy for Mr Baxter?”

Hatch stroked his nose a moment. “Aye,” he said. “I think they might do.”

“They’re hostessing at the moment, but I can easily take them off. Where would you like to be put? There’s seven and eight. Your friend would like number eight; it’s lovely and quiet up at the end.”

Mrs Shooter had been consulting a sheet of paper. She now glanced up, as if to remind herself of what Baxter looked like, and added softly to Hatch: “Unless he’s a Special Requirements? Rose is still off with her back, you know.”

“No, that’s all right. Daisy will do fine.” Hatch gave a friendly nod to Baxter, who was trying not to appear uncomfortable. “Chef’s recommendation,” he said waggishly; then to Mrs Shooter, “We’re not staying, love. We’ll run the girls round to my place.”

Mrs Shooter's helpful smile faded. "Oh, now wait a minute, Mr Hatch. I'm not sure that that's quite on. I mean, this isn't a Chinese restaurant, or something, doing take-away meals."

Baxter laughed nervously.

"Rubbish, old duck," said Hatch. He took a pinch of her cheek and wobbled it fondly. She tolerated this intimacy for a moment, then affected impatience and brushed his hand away.

"That's all very well, and I know you're the boss, but I'm responsible for those girls. I like to be sure they're not getting into any trouble."

"Hell, woman, what do you want—a deposit?"

"It's not wise, Mr Hatch, this off-the-premises stuff. It really isn't wise, I'm warning you."

Hatch stepped to the door and beckoned Baxter. "We'll wait in the car," he said to Mrs Shooter. "Send them out straight away, there's a good lass." He departed in an almost off-hand manner, like a customer pocketing a small and unimportant purchase from a shop. Baxter faltered a few seconds in the doorway, gave Mrs Shooter a little bow and a perplexed smile, and followed.

"You're asking for trouble, son," said Margaret Shooter to her empty boudoir.

Chapter Six

Mrs Shooter's dire prognostication was fulfilled within the hour in the shape of the most remarkable public exhibition that ever, so far as anyone remembered, had affronted the inhabitants of Partney Avenue and Arnhem Crescent.

The actual witnesses were few, but those few were well able to give pictorial accounts that did justice, and more than justice, to what they had seen. And, as skill in narration increased with practice, the story eventually and joyfully accepted by the town was one of Pompeiian plenitude.

The most significant version, inasmuch as it constituted an official complaint to authority, was provided by a Miss Hilda Cannon, aged fifty-one, of Lehar House, Oakland, a cul-de-sac off Partney Drive.

Miss Cannon, formerly for many years the female lead of the Flaxborough Operatic Society, was a tall, thin, somewhat desiccated lady, who lived with an ancient mother and five corgi dogs. These dogs she was in the nightly habit of exercising in relays around certain grass-verged roads south and east of Jubilee Park in order that they might, in accordance with their mistress's loyal devotion to imperial principles, defecate at a safe distance from their own immediate neighbourhood.

She began her third and last trip half an hour or so before midnight. Montgomery, the most malicious of the corgi quintet, had dragged her along the whole of Partney Avenue and some way down Arnhem Crescent before making its first exploratory halt. Miss Cannon adopted the time-honoured stance of dog owners, holding the slackened leash casually at one end while she searched the horizons with a cool nobility of visage that proclaimed her utter lack of responsibility for what was going on at the other.

Her gaze happened to be upon the upper storey of the house on Partney Avenue directly opposite its conjunction at right-angles with Arnhem Crescent, when she heard a car draw gradually and quietly to a stop just behind her. The car had come from the direction of Fen Street and the town.

Miss Cannon turned her head just far enough to see the big black shape. The driver had parked on a stretch of the road that was humped over a stream conduit so that the front wheels were higher than the rear. No door opened. The engine continued to tick over softly.

She looked away again, but tightened her grip on Montgomery's leash.

The dog snuffled around in the short grass at the edge of the sidewalk and once or twice squatted

experimentally. Miss Cannon resolved to pull it clear and walk on. It was better that Montgomery should be frustrated and even a little vengeful for a while than that she should risk abduction whatever other unpleasantness the man in the car might be contemplating.

She gave the leash a tug.

At that very second—exactly as if she had pulled a switch—there was a silent explosion of violet white light. The dog jumped and tried frantically to scuttle away.

“Now, Monty! Heel! Stay! Sit!” She sought the magic word.

Montgomery bit her leg, but it fortunately was too upset to get good purchase. She managed to slip the leash round a gate-post, then looked about her.

The light was coming from the car’s two sets of twin head-lamps.

The four fierce beams streamed out along Arnhem Crescent, at the slightly upward angle imparted by the car’s tilt, to engulf in sun-like brilliance the upper part of “Primrose Mount”, the residence of Mr and Mrs Arnold Hatch.

How very remarkable, mused Miss Cannon. Just like the floodlighting of Buckingham Palace. Was something being advertised, perhaps?

She stood staring up, her thin, severe mouth uncharacteristically slightly agape.

A couple of seconds went by, then all the upstairs curtains of “Primrose Mount” began to move.

In one smooth, synchronous action, they parted and withdrew across the windows. Everything within the room beyond was revealed in bright and sharp detail, like an elevated stage set.

Miss Cannon took a gulp of air as if she had been punched in the stomach. Instinct urged her to shut her eyes, but their lids had been jammed open by shock.

For a while, the four people on stage in the sky above Partney Avenue seemed also to be suffering from some kind of paralysis. Frozen in the attitudes in which the searchlights had discovered them, they were not unlike a group of shop window models waiting to be dressed. A more worldly observer than Miss Cannon might have seen a resemblance to a still from a blue movie; one more classical and educated, a Greek frieze depicting nymphs and satyrs. She, though, whose imaginative world was not wider than that delineated by musical comedy, was at a loss for analogy: nothing like that had happened even in “The Arcadians”.

The two girls in the tableau were the first to recover power of movement. Diane Winge, 16, of Queen’s Road, Flaxborough, alias Daisy de Vere, hostess and gogo dancer, abandoned the posture into which she had been cajoled by her new friend Mr Baxter and made what haste she could to get off the water bed. This necessitated a frantic, high-stepping trudge, like that of one escaping from a boat. Never had there been publicly offered such impressive testimony to the truth of Mrs Winge’s anxious description of her daughter as “a well developed girl”.

The skinnier but slightly less agile Lily, who was five years older and correspondingly more practical than Daisy, did not try to rise to her feet but instead rolled to the bed’s edge and over it. She thus much reduced the chances of being recognised by outside spectators as Selina Clay, whose father was the headmaster of Flaxborough Grammar School, was a resident of Dorley Road and therefore a fairly near neighbour of Mr Hatch.

Baxter took longest to grasp what had happened and to react to the new circumstances. He first tried shouting “Put the bloody light out!” over and over again, then, suddenly converted to realisation that the dreadful glare came from outside, he lumbered to the window and began hauling at curtains like a drunken sailor trying to shorten sail.

Two curtains had been dragged from their runway altogether before Hatch was able to persuade Baxter to desist. Then, each seizing and wrapping a ruined curtain around his middle, they retreated hastily to the door and sought refuge in some rearward and unexposed portion of the house.

The girls, tipsily giggling, left their shelter in the lee of the bed and scampered across the floor

pursuit.

~~About a minute later, the car's lights were dimmed. It drew away as quietly as it had arrived, passed Miss Cannon and made a right turn into Partney Avenue.~~

“ ‘And leaves the world to darkness, and to me’ ,” she said to herself, feeling by now just a little hysterical. She allowed Montgomery to pull her as far as Fen Street corner. Should she go the few extra yards to the police station and make her complaint there and then? No, better wait until morning when she would be more likely to find in attendance an officer of rank commensurate with the seriousness of her report.

Miss Cannon began to return the way she had come, urging her dog homeward with a mixture of pleas and blandishments. She was still too far off to notice when the car she had encountered earlier re-entered Arnhem Crescent and drove into its waiting garage.

When she reached the corner of Partney Avenue once more, she looked up at “Primrose Mount.” A light moved fitfully about in the bedroom. Someone was using a torch. For an instant, a figure was outlined; the movement of others could be dimly discerned. There was a sudden squeal. Then another. The squeals, thought Miss Cannon, betokened felicity rather than fear. She shuddered.

Detective Inspector Purbright was well aware that there was no need for him to be bothered with reports of mundane misdemeanours. What the desk sergeant had described softly over the telephone as “a simple case of bishop-flashing, by the sound of it” clearly came into that category. Yet the lady had asked most particularly to see him. It would be discourteous to refuse, so long as she wasn't plummy crazy. And no, the sergeant assured him, she did not seem to be that: she was Miss Cannon, who used to sing for the Operatic. Ah, yes, said Purbright, of course (dear God, that Indian love call!). He came down to her.

In the bare little interviewing room next to the cupboard where the constables' wet weather capes were stored, Miss Cannon told her tale.

The light-headedness which had been evidenced the previous night by the eruption in her mind of the line from Gray's *Elegy* afflicted her no longer. She gave a prosaic, if gaunt-faced, account of the distressing spectacle at “Primrose Mount” and said that she was quite prepared to testify when the police brought the case to court.

Purbright acknowledged at once that Miss Cannon was being very public-spirited in the matter. She would realise, no doubt, that it could be a distressing experience to undergo cross-examination in cases of that kind.

“If,” the inspector added after he had massaged the back of his neck and stared thoughtfully at his finger ends, “a case does, in this instance, exist.”

“I don't quite see what you mean, inspector. I have told you what I saw. Surely you are not going to suggest that”—she sought the right word—“that exhibitions of that sort are allowed?”

“As exhibitions, no, probably not. But I rather fancy that those responsible were no more eager for you to see what they were doing than you were anxious to be a spectator. Intention, you see—that's important.”

“Someone might not *intend* to commit murder,” observed Miss Cannon coldly, “but that would be a small comfort to the victim.”

“I take your point, Miss Cannon, but the fact remains that homicide and indecency involve differences of definition. You tell me, for instance, that both these men were, as the phrase goes, exposing themselves.”

“They most certainly were!” Miss Cannon's indignant emphasis dashed whatever hope Purbright might have entertained that she was actuated merely by maidenly delusion.

He nodded sagely. “Yes, well, the law concerning that sort of behaviour contains the words ‘with

intent to insult a female'. Two questions arise. One—did you feel insulted, Miss Cannon?"

"Of course I did."

Purbright raised a hand and tilted his head slightly. "Are you quite sure? Disgusted, perhaps. But insulted? Think."

Miss Cannon had a suspicion that the wrong answer could be subject to unseemly interpretation. "Both," she said.

"The second question," said Purbright, "is this. Did those men *intend* to insult you? Did they even know you were there?"

"Really, I cannot speak for them."

"Precisely. You do see, don't you, that these matters are not always as simple as they might appear."

She stared at him. "If I didn't think I knew you better, Mr Purbright, I should suspect that you are trying to make light of what I saw going on last night."

"Certainly not. Acts of public indecency are still taken very seriously by the courts."

"As they ought to be."

There was a pause. Then Purbright said: "Policemen are very fond of saying that their job is to enforce the law, not to justify it. You might think that that is too easy a let-out, but I fancy that life for all of us would become much more unpleasant if every policeman were to be issued with a sort of moral truncheon."

The Mounties in "Rose Marie", Miss Cannon reflected, had never talked like this. She sighed. Purbright saw that his argument had merely perplexed her. He hitched his chair nearer and spoke quietly.

"It was a nasty experience for you. I do understand. Look—leave it with us now. We'll make some more inquiries. But remember that laws are pretty specific things. They're rather like dog leashes."

And with this happily conceived simile was Miss Cannon's faith in authority restored. She went out into Fen Street humming "a policeman's lot is not a happy one".

By mid-day, the mysterious irrigation system of Flaxborough gossip was pouring into its main channels descriptions of the Partney Avenue orgy that made Miss Cannon's account sound like an expurgated extract from Louisa May Alcott.

Of the dozen or more girls said to have taken part, eight at least had been confidently identified. Several were fourth- and fifth-year pupils at Flaxborough High School and included the daughters of prominent local tradespeople. A lady in Jubilee Park Crescent, nearly a quarter of a mile from "Primrose Mount", was the source of the pungent intelligence that a second batch of girls had been delivered in a car bearing CD plates. Someone else had been vouchsafed a display of nude leapfrogs and had heard cries in a foreign tongue, he thought Asiatic, possibly Chinese.

Inspector Purbright, knowing his fellow citizens, inclined to the view that most of the tales were of subjective rather than objective significance.

"Nine-tenths wishful thinking, Sid," he declared to Detective Sergeant Love, who had been impressed by the volume and sensational nature of the evidence.

Love belonged to that type of cheerful and preternaturally youthful-seeming men who join police forces simply because they want to be with the goodies. In eighteen years' service, his natural guilelessness, like his rubicund complexion, had remained inviolate. Purbright was very fond of him and supposed that he would have been revered as a holy man had he been born into one of those societies which equate idiocy with sanctity.

"I don't see why people should *wish* things like that to be happening," said the sergeant. "Not unless"—he tried out a gay dog grin—"they're hopeful of being invited up."

Purbright had not the heart to pass on his finding, based on long observation, that the most diligent discoverer of sin in others was the chronic harbourer of a desire to do likewise.

“What do we know about old Hatch?” he asked instead.

Love considered, then began to catalogue.

“He’s a bit of a big noise. He used to be an alderman on the council until they did away with them. Building contracts were what made his money, but they reckon he’s doubled it up in the last three years with that club of his on Hunting’s Lane. We did him for being drunk in charge in, let me see”—Love gazed aloft and sucked air through pouted lips—“aye, 1965. They say he’s still a Mason, but Bill Malley reckons he was unfrocked, or whatever they do to them, when he was caught fiddling the quantity surveys for that memorial chapel he built for them. He owns a racehorse and a yacht...”

“A yacht?” Purbright feared the account was getting out of hand.

“Well, one of those whopping great cruiser things that are moored up beyond Henderson’s Mill.”

“Ah.”

“He used to be a Methodist. Nowadays he always wears a sort of banker’s hat,” said Love. “That could be because of his missus, though. They reckon she’s mad keen on status.”

“In that case, Mrs Hatch is not going to be very pleased when she hears what her husband has been up to. I take it that nobody suggests she was there last night?”

The sergeant shrugged.

“On the other hand,” Purbright said, “we mustn’t rule out collusion. I understand orgies score quite highly in the status game. Perhaps Mrs Hatch thought it would be nice to have one.”

“Gruesome,” said the sergeant, who had heard the word used a lot the previous evening by a young woman at the Badminton club.

“Go and have a tactful word with Hatch, will you, Sid. See if you can find what actually did happen.”

“He’ll tell lies.”

“Not a doubt of it. But as long as they are reasonable lies, we can ask no more of him.”

“Shall I try and find out who the girls were? They might be under age.” Love’s tone suggested hope rather than misgiving.

“They were probably a couple of totties from his club. You won’t get much change there.”

Love went cheerfully to the door. Delicacy of inquiries never bothered him. He had something of the asbestos self-confidence of the Children in the Fiery Furnace.

Before getting on with more important matters, Purbright remained a little longer in private speculation.

Two questions in particular intrigued him.

Whose was the car that had been so fortunately placed as a source of illumination?

And what would happen to him if Hatch—a man Purbright knew to have in his nature that element of vengefulness common to most dedicated makers of money—found out?

Chapter Seven

When Edmund Amis arrived at “Primrose Mount” soon after ten o’clock, he was surprised to find his employer grumpy and preoccupied. Hatch was generally a cheerful, even jocund, day-opener, having discovered many years before that nothing makes people more nervous, and therefore commercially vulnerable, in the morning than somebody else’s high spirits. Today, though, he looked as if he had slept late and was determined to get the rest of the day at a cut rate.

“First thing I want you to do,” he said to Amis, “is to get on to these people by phone and ask them to send someone over. Someone who matters; not a messenger boy.” He handed Amis the card Baxter had given him before a hasty and not altogether happy departure by taxi three hours earlier.

“Mackintosh-Brooke?” Amis sounded as if the name was familiar to him in some discreditable way.

“That’s right.”

Hatch regarded him steadily, prepared to quell objection. Amis was a university man—Hatch (“I’ll pay for the best”) had insisted on that—and he formed opinions by much more complicated and devious processes than did ordinary people. It was nice to own such a clever piece of machinery as Amis. He possessed admirable manners. Partly because of these, and partly by virtue of highly developed business discernment,

Amis impressed his employer’s friends and intimidated his enemies. So long as Hatch felt in command, which was almost all the time, he allowed himself neither to feel inferior to his secretary nor to show that sense of inferiority by refusing to defer to Amis’s judgment. Today, though, he felt shagged. And no bloody jumped-up college boy, with or without a string of letters after his name, was going to tell *him* how he ought to spend his money.

Amis nodded briskly. “Will do.” Not the least of his natural gifts was a sense of when to keep his own views to himself.

For a moment Hatch looked bewildered. Then he scowled and sat down to read his mail, which Amis had brought over from the club.

The room that Mrs Hatch called the study was in fact an office. Conceived by its builder in the 1920s as a billiards room, it was spacious and more plain in design than the rest of the house. The walls were a pale sage green, with gilt sconces set at intervals at head height. A long, leather-upholstered settee, originally installed for the benefit of billiards spectators, remained on its platform against one wall. Hatch called it his petitioners’ bench. Callers, other than people of obvious importance or known usefulness, were liable to be directed to sit there until Hatch, long delayed by inexpressibly vital affairs, should sweep in and eye them on his way to his desk like a busy workman glancing at the day’s quota of charity cases.

When Sergeant Love arrived at half-past ten, he was not disposed of in this way. Secretary Amis invited him to make himself comfortable in the family sitting-room and asked him if he would like a cup of coffee. Love said that he would, thanks very much, and hoped that it would be made with milk but not with a skin on that stuck to the top lip and then slopped down the chin when you took the cup away.

Hatch, not yet recovered from the alarms and excursions of the night, greeted the sergeant less affably than he normally would have done, but was careful not to appear apprehensive.

“I’m afraid,” said Love, “that we’ve received a complaint, sir. Regarding these premises.”

This message he delivered with the brightest air imaginable, as if it were the intimation of a lottery win.

“Really? I’m sorry to hear that, officer. Just what sort of a complaint?”

“A member of the public—a lady, sir” (Hatch nodded gravely: a lady, yes, he’d heard of such people) “has complained of certain behaviour which she alleges was being committed on your first floor last night. She considers it to have been indecent, as a matter of fact, and I wondered if you care to make some observation, sir.”

For a long time, Hatch regarded Love with a mixture of thoughtfulness and mild amusement which the sergeant later acknowledged to be altogether devoid of guilt. Then he grinned openly.

“Whoever this lady is,” he said, “either she’s pulling your leg or else she’s one of those unfortunate souls who get delusions about sex.”

“Sex?” countered Love, feeling rather cunning. He had said nothing about sex.

—“You used the word indecent, sergeant. Is there some other sort of indecency, then? A non-sex kind?”

No, said Love, perhaps there wasn’t. But the lady wasn’t one to have delusions. He could vouch for her being respectable and level-headed.

“In that case,” said Hatch, “it’s clear that she must have made a mistake.”

“There have been other reports, sir.”

“Reports of what? Look here, sergeant, how can I answer your questions if I don’t know what you’re talking about? Who’s supposed to have done what?”

Love would have liked to believe that Hatch’s sudden tetchiness was a sign that he was about to crack beneath shrewdly applied pressure. He tried the line that always disconcerted criminals on television:

“Why don’t *you* tell *me*, sir?”

“Don’t be bloody silly,” said Hatch, and very effectively left it at that.

Amis brought in the coffee. It seemed that he had made it himself. Love peeped over the rim of his cup before Amis handed it to him from the tray. Very milky-looking. And not a sign of those wrinkles that warned of a skin that would stick to his upper lip.

“Mmm,” said Love appreciatively when he had stirred in four spoonsful of sugar and taken a sip.

Hatch noticed. “Good lad, that,” he said, nodding in the direction his secretary had taken. “He’s what I call an instant expert, is Amis. Mention anything you like and he’d be able to write a book about it straight off. I got him from a proper university, you know, not from an advert in the *Citizen*.”

Love drank his coffee rapidly and with evident enjoyment. Until it was finished he said nothing but looked about him in methodical appraisal of the room’s furniture and decorations. The wallpaper, cleverly imitative of tapestry, showed Chinese scenes, with pagodas and junks and dinky little Chinese bridges. There were some oriental-looking things, too, in the big glass-fronted display cabinet on one side of the fireplace: a paper fan, some little ivory coolies, tea cups without handles (or were they silver basins?) and a slinky-eyed gent with a great pot belly.

It was this character—Buddha, Love supposed—that served as a *memento venerei* to bring him back to the subject of his inquiries.

“The complaint, sir—the one I came about—was to the effect that unclothed persons were exposing themselves at one of the windows upstairs. The complainant spoke of two males and two females.”

“Rubbish,” said Hatch.

“You mean there couldn’t possibly have been any truth in the story, sir?”

“That is exactly what I mean.”

“And the other reports. They were all wrong as well, were they, sir?”

“Obviously.”

For some moments, the two men looked at each other in silence. Love’s expression was a bland compound of politeness, patience and, Hatch thought, utter disbelief.

Suddenly Hatch raised a finger and said “Ah.” He appeared to be thinking hard about something that had just at that very second occurred to him. “I wonder.” He smiled wryly.

“Sir?”

“I think I’ve solved your little mystery, sergeant.”

Love frowned. *His* little mystery? Who said it was *his*, for goodness sake?

“Yes, Mr Baxter did mention this morning before he and his wife left that they’d had a slight embarrassing moment last night. Nothing serious, but I can see that it could have been the cause of these tales that you’ve heard.”

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