A DALZIEL AND PASCOE NOVEL

Reginald Hill

AN APRIL SHROUD

'One of Britain's most consistently excellent crime writers' *The Times*

Reginald Hill

An April Shroud

«HarperCollins»

Hill R.

An April Shroud / R. Hill — «HarperCollins»,

Superintendent Dalziel falls for the recently bereaved Mrs Fielding's ample charms, and has to be rescued from a litter of fresh corpses by Inspector Pascoe.Superintendent Andy Dalziel's holiday runs into trouble when he gets marooned by flood water. Rescued and taken to nearby Lake House, he discovers all is not well: the owner has just died tragically and the family fortunes are in decline. He also finds himself drawn to attractive widow, Bonnie Fielding.But several more deaths are to follow. And by the time Pascoe gets involved, it looks like the normally hard-headed Dalziel might have compromised himself beyond redemption.

© Hill R.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

REGINALD HILL 6
Copyright 7
Contents 8
Epigraph 9
1 10
2 14
3 20
4 27
5 35
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 40

REGINALD HILL
AN APRIL SHROUD

A Dalziel and Pascoe novel

HARPER

Copyright

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Harper An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF
Previously published in paperback by HarperCollins*Publishers* in 1993 and by Grafton in 1987
First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins*Publishers* 1975
www.harpercollins.co.uk

Copyright © Reginald Hill 1975
Reginald Hill asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins ebooks.

HarperCollinsPublishers has made every reasonable effort to ensure that any picture content and written content in this ebook has been included or removed in accordance with the contractual and technological constraints in operation at the time of publication.

Source ISBN 9780586072615
Ebook Edition © July 2015 ISBN 9780007370276
Version 2015-06-18

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Epigraph
1 Epithalamium
2 A Bridge to Nowhere
3 A Nourishing Broth
4 Premises, Premises
5 A Pleasant Surprise
6 A Step into Summer
7 A Fried Egg Sandwich
8 Family History
9 The Setting of Riddles
10 The Presentation of Awards
11 Hello Sailor
12 A View in the Morning
13 An Intimate Deodorant
14 When We Dead Awake
15 Pictures of Innocence
16 Dead Ducks
17 Opening Night
18 The Last Days of Pompeii
Keep Reading
About the Author
Also by the Author
About the Publisher

Epigraph

… the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all
And hides the green hill in an April shroud
JOHN KEATS
De'il and Dalziel begin with ane letter
The de'il's nae guid and Dalziel's nae better.
Old Galloway Saying

1
Epithalamium

No one knew how it came about that Dalziel was making a speech. Pascoe had with great reluctance let himself be persuaded into a church wedding, partly by the argument sentimental (*Mum's looking forward to it*), partly by the argument economic (*Dad's paying for it*), but mainly by the suspicion, hotly denied but well supported by circumstantial evidence, that Ellie herself wanted it.

But they had been agreed about the reception. *A pint and a pie*, insisted Pascoe. *A glass of sherry and a sausage on a stick*, Ellie translated to her mother. In the event, they were drinking champagne and eating creamed chicken canapés, but at least they were on their feet, able to mingle freely, and no one was going to start reading telegrams and making speeches. Especially not Detective Superintendent Andrew Dalziel.

'I reckon I know Sergeant Pascoe, *Inspector* Pascoe, *Peter*, as well as anybody,' proclaimed Dalziel.

'It can't be the drink,' murmured Pascoe. 'He never gets drunk. Not so you'd notice.'

'That's on scotch. Dad says he's sunk two bottles of Champagne so far,' said Ellie.

'He's counting, is he?'

'No! He just noticed, mainly because merry Andrew there keeps calling it perry. Which hurts when you've paid for genuine non-vintage Champers.'

They giggled together and drew some reproving glances from a group of elderly relations who clearly believed that Dalziel's speech was the first reassuringly normal thing at a wedding where the bride had not worn white and there was no sit-down meal at the reception. *If you do it standing up, it doesn't count* was a maxim which could carry a decent body through nearly all of life's tribulations.

'He's a good policeman,' Dalziel assured the elderly relatives. 'He'll go far. Deserves every success. I've encouraged him from the start. And I don't flatter myself when I say I've managed to give him a bit of a leg-up …'

He paused and mopped his brow with a huge khaki handkerchief. The bald patch, uncompromisingly visible through the grey stubble of his hair, shone with sweat. He smiled now as he lumbered towards a dirty wedding joke, and with his shining face, broad smile, broader paunch, and the Champagne glass held perpetually at the ready a foot from his lips, he should have been a figure of Pickwickian jollity. Instead, he looked as if he had just kicked the door down and was demanding that no one moved as he had the place surrounded.

'… a bit of a leg-up in his career,' he resumed. 'But he'll have to manage by himself tonight.'

'Oh Jesus,' breathed Pascoe.

The elderly relatives didn't much care for the joke but were still willing to give marks for effort.

'Ellie I don't know so well. But she'll do very well, I'm certain. My old Scottish grand-dad used to say, when you're picking a lassie, start at the bottom and work up. Broad hips for the bairns, broad shoulders for the housework, and a broad smile for good-nature and a peaceful life. Ellie, now …'

Some early-warning system must have told him that he was heading into troubled waters.

'Ellie,' he repeated. 'It's a hard job being a policeman's wife. Not every woman can do it. But if she can, and I'm sure Ellie can, then it's a grand and rewarding task. There's nothing better for a policeman than to be well looked after at home. Nothing. I can tell you … I've been looked after in my time … once …'

'In every Toby Belch there's an Andrew Aguecheek trying to get out,' murmured Ellie. 'I think he'd have been better droning on about my big mouth and huge bum.'

'So I give you,' cried Dalziel, explosively recovering from his introspective lapse, 'the happy pair! May *their* lot be a happy one!'

'The happy pair!' echoed the assembled crowd of about forty relations, colleagues, friends, while Pascoe and Ellie looked at each other with love and speculation in their eyes.

Later as they ran across the car park of the Three Bells to Pascoe's ancient Riley, it was Dalziel who trotted alongside them, using a Martini table-parasol to fend off the rain which had been beating down unremittingly on Lincolnshire for twenty-four hours.

'Good luck,' mouthed Dalziel at the passenger window. To Ellie he was almost invisible through the running glass. She smiled and waved. Her parents and the other guests had not risked their wedding finery in the downpour, which meant that at least they were spared the usual primitive valedictory rites. It also meant that she couldn't see anyone to wave at except Dalziel and even he had moved out of their way round the back of the car.

'Let's go,' she said.

Looking back, she saw him standing in the middle of the car park, waving the umbrella in a gesture of farewell and (accidentally, she hoped) menace.

'You're sure he doesn't know where we're going?' she asked Pascoe anxiously.

'No one does,' he replied with confidence.

'Thank God for that. I wouldn't put it past him to decide to spend his holiday with us.' She relaxed with a deep sigh, then suddenly laughed. 'But he was funny, wasn't he? *Leg up!'*

Pascoe laughed with her and they even managed to laugh again five minutes later when they were stopped by a police Panda driver, curious to know why they were towing a police helmet, a police boot and a banner inscribed Hello! Hello!! Hello!!!

'I thought it went very well, George,' said Dalziel. 'Very well.'

He sounded self-congratulatory as though he had arranged the ceremony himself.

'I suppose it did,' said Detective Inspector George Headingley, glancing at his watch. He and Dalziel were the sole survivors of five policemen who had travelled down from Yorkshire for the wedding. In fact they were the sole survivors of the entire wedding group and it was only his awareness of their profession and status which prevented mine host of the Three Bells from pushing them out into the gloomy damp of a late spring afternoon in Lincolnshire.

'Stop looking at your watch, George,' said Dalziel. 'Have another drink.'

He had abandoned the pernicious 'perry' and obtained a bottle of the true Hippocrene, Glen Grant straight malt, two large doses of which had restored him to his customary dignity and composure.

'I really mustn't, sir,' said Headingley. 'It's all right for you, but I've got to drive back this evening. God knows what's happened back there with all the best minds down here!'

'Mondays are always quiet,' pronounced Dalziel. 'One for the road. A small one.'

Headingley knew better than to resist when Dalziel insisted. He watched the broad strong hand pour another measure of scotch into his glass. There was no unsteadiness, no wastage. 'A small one,' to Dalziel was the precise equivalent of a Scottish pub double. Dalziel's ancestry had long been subsumed by his Yorkshire upbringing, but in some matters he was true to his heritage. He tended to become very sad at the sight of an English small whisky and very irritated when people mispronounced his name.

Headingley had known him, or known of him, all his working life. Dalziel had been a sergeant when Headingley joined the mid-Yorkshire force and his reputation was already established. *Thick as two short planks*, opined the scions of the uniformed branch. *But if you get hit by two short planks, it doesn't half hurt.*

His rise to his present rank of Detective Superintendent had not been meteoric, but it had been inevitable. When the hippo comes up for air, the lighter creatures of the surface impede the process at their peril. These lighter creatures had included his wife.

Headingley did not like the man, but in his own interests had developed a protective shield of long-suffering diffidence which passed for a relationship. He usually contrived to be on the move in

Dalziel's vicinity and letting himself be pinned down like this was an error attributable to champagne and post-wedding sentimentality. And also, he suspected, to a reluctance on Dalziel's part to be left to himself.

'Do you think they'll make a go of it?' he asked suddenly.

'What?' said Dalziel.

'Pascoe and his missus.'

The fat man shifted his bulk, not visibly affected by several months of intermittent dieting, and fixed his wide, short-sighted gaze on Headingley.

'Why shouldn't they?' he asked aggressively.

He feels protective, thought Headingley. Mustn't say anything against his precious whizz-kid, must we?

Absurdly, he realized he felt jealous.

Downing his drink, he pushed himself out of the chair.

'No reason,' he said. 'Must be off now, sir. Quiet or not, some of us will be back at work tonight.'

'This is the first holiday I've taken in God knows how long,' answered Dalziel. 'I'll be back in a fortnight today.'

There was a plaintive note in his voice which alarmed Headingley more than aggression.

'Have you decided what you're doing yet?' he asked cautiously.

'No.' The grizzled head shook ponderously. 'I'll just drive around a bit. Look at the countryside if I can see it for this bloody rain.'

'Oh.'

Headingley's voice was studiously neutral, but Dalziel shot him a malicious glance.

'Of course, if I get bored, I might just come back early. Take you all by surprise. Give you all your sticks of rock where you're not looking for them.'

'That would be nice,' said Headingley. 'Enjoy yourself, sir. See you the week after next.'

Dalziel slowly screwed the top back on his bottle after Headingley had gone. Next he rose, not unsteadily but with a slowness which in another man might easily have become unsteadiness. He had taken the precaution of booking in at Orburn's main hotel, the Lady Hamilton, situated only a couple of hundred yards from the Three Bells. A short brisk walk was just what he needed now. It would blow, or in this weather wash, the stuffiness out of his mind, set him up nicely for a good solid meal. These buffets were all right but they didn't give a man anything to get his teeth into, especially a man who had resolved to forget his diet while on holiday.

But at the hotel he met a set-back.

'The restaurant does not open for another hour, sir,' said the shiny under-manager who to Dalziel's jaundiced eye looked as if he had been anointed with Mansion Polish. 'It is, after all, barely five-thirty.'

'Is that so?' said Dalziel. He stepped close to the under-manager and bared his teeth in a humourless smile. 'In that case, there'll be time for me to take a good look round your kitchens, won't there?'

Despite this inauspicious start the meal turned out to be almost as good as had been promised by the hotel publicity. And afterwards in the bar just to add a little spice to the evening there was a scene.

A tall blonde girl, who had caught Dalziel's attention in the restaurant because she wore a deep plunging dress without showing the slightest evidence that she had breasts, punched one of her two male companions on the nose. It was no mere feminine slap, nor even a piece of robust horse-play, but a whole-hearted punch, starting from behind the girl's right ear, ending with a squelchy thump on the point of the man's nose. It was a good blow for such a skinny fighter and it drove the recipient backwards over his tall bar-stool, setting up an interesting chain reaction along the whole length of the bar.

Dalziel sitting at a table by the door grinned with delight. The girl, who looked nineteen or twenty at the most, now casually picked up her bag and walked away from the bar. Dalziel stood up and opened the door for her.

'Well done, lass,' he said, genially peering down her dress. 'I really enjoyed that.'

'Did you?' she said. 'Let me double the pleasure.'

Dalziel was on his feet and much more solidly built than her first antagonist. Nevertheless the blow drove him backwards on to his table, shattering his glass and spilling the ashtray to the floor.

'Jesus!' he said, gingerly feeling his nose and looking after the girl's disappearing back.

He glowered round the room, defying anyone to be amused by his discomfiture, but most eyes were focused on the attempts to restore order at the bar. The floored young man was bleeding slightly but looked more puzzled than pained. He was in his early twenties, fair-haired, tall, athletically slim, a type Dalziel associated with the three-quarter lines of fashionable rugby teams composed mainly of young men called Bingo and Noddy. His companion was of an age, but shorter and stouter, in fact far too stout for someone so young.

He seemed to be the only person at the bar who had preserved his drink intact and he surveyed the others with a faintly complacent grin.

'Charley,' he said. 'You really ought to buy all these people a drink.'

'You buy them a drink,' said Charley. 'She's your bloody sister.'

Someone came through the door behind Dalziel.

'What seems to be the trouble?' said a voice in his ear.

He turned and looked at a small middle-aged man wearing an old pin-stripe suit of such hideous cut that it could not even be said to have seen better days.

'Trouble?' said Dalziel.

'I was in the restaurant. One of the waiters said something about a fracas.'

'Did he?' said Dalziel. 'I saw nowt.'

He turned and left, pleased for once in his life to have been a sufferer of, rather than from, witness blindness. No one but a sadist or a newspaper reporter would have let a rumour of a fight drag him out of the Lady Hamilton's dining-room and Dalziel had no wish to start his holiday as a comic paragraph in some local paper. Come to think of it, he had pretty little wish to start his holiday at all. It was supposed to do him good, to rid him of the irritability and fatigue which had begun to dominate his working life in the last few months. But it was the time away from work, the time he spent by himself, which he feared most, and all a holiday would do was give him more of that. But it had to be tried, he recognized that. Otherwise … well, there was no otherwise he cared to contemplate.

Tomorrow he would set off like a good tourist to explore the highways and byways of the Lincolnshire countryside. Peace and quiet away from the mainstream of traffic, and in a fortnight he could return to work revitalized. Perhaps.

Meanwhile, as he had done for many nights now, he set about postponing the moment of switching off his bedroom light until he was on the very brink of sleep. He poured himself a carefully measured dose of scotch and put it on the bedside table. Next, clad in pyjamas suitable in pattern and size for the fitting of three or four deckchairs, he climbed into bed, placed his reading spectacles gingerly on his still throbbing nose and picked up his book. It was Bulwer Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii*, which he had stolen from the hotel where he spent his honeymoon and had been reading and re-reading off and on now for thirty years.

2
A Bridge to Nowhere

The countryside was brimming. The rain had continued all night and he had woken several times to hear its monotonous pizzicato on the tiny metal balcony which some ironical builder had positioned outside his unopenable window. It had taken several medicinal malts to get him a couple of hours of dreamless sleep and he had been packed and ready for breakfast by eight o'clock.

He collected his bill at reception just as the under-manager passed without speaking. Dalziel, however, was not a man for childish grudges and he addressed the other cheerfully.

'Listen,' he said. 'Two things I don't do. I don't pay VAT on a service-charge and I don't pay a service-charge on VAT. You get it sorted.'

It took a little time to get it sorted but he was still on his way shortly after nine-thirty.

Orburn was a country town of about seven thousand souls and had been neglected by development and history alike. Nothing earth-shaking had ever happened here nor did it now seem likely that it would. Dalziel, in a conscientious rather than enthusiastic attempt to prepare himself for his touring holiday, had read in a Guide to Lincolnshire of the fine broach spire of the small Early English church in which Ellie and Pascoe had been married, but the thing itself hadn't done much for him. The Guide had found little else to say and the only choice left to Dalziel now was one of direction. The main road (if so it could be called) through the town ran east to west. His car was pointing west so that was the direction he chose. A few miles farther on he hit the north-south trunk road and was faced with another choice. North would take him to Lincoln which he ought to visit. But it was also the direction in which home and work lay and he had the feeling that once he started north he wouldn't stop till the anguished faces of Inspector George Headingley and his colleagues told him he was home.

He turned south, spent ten minutes crawling in the blinding wake of a convoy of huge lorries and angrily turned off the main road and began to work his way back east along a network of narrow country lanes. It was only now that he realized how wet it really was. His morning paper had talked of serious flooding in some parts of the country but in print this made as little impact as shooting in Ulster or air disasters in the Andes. Now, however, as more and more frequently he encountered troughs of brown water wherever the road dipped, he began to realize that the weather was likely to be a key factor in his plans. Finally he stopped, partly because the next trough looked suspiciously deep, and partly because a signpost indicated a road coming in from the left; or rather, where the road ought to be. A hump-backed bridge rose over the stream which, running parallel to the road he had been following, was the source of most of the overspill. But now it was a bridge to nowhere. The land must have dropped away on the far side, the stream had completely broken its banks and the bridge descended into water.

Dalziel got out of the car and looked at the signpost. Another mile in his direction lay High Fold while in better weather the bridge might have led him to Low Fold, two miles away, and (here he laughed humourlessly) Orburn only twelve miles away. He glanced at his watch. It had taken him more than an hour.

He strolled to the top of the hump and gazed out over the flooded fields. The rain he realized to his surprise had stopped, though the atmosphere was still very humid. It was quite warm and there was even a dirty orange glow behind one threadbare section of the low cloud cover where presumably the sun was self-destructively trying to suck back into the air some of the moisture of the recent downpour. Curls of mist and vapour were beginning to form *art nouveau* designs in the more regular pattern of trees and hedgerow breaking the surface of the level waters. Patches of high ground too rose serenely from the floods. On one of these about a quarter of a mile away it was possible to make

out a house to which design and distance gave the outline of a story-book castle. Someone had been lucky or wise in his choice of site. Farther than this the damp air made it impossible to see, but the floods certainly stretched as far as the visible horizon.

There is something ineffably depressing about water where it shouldn't be. Dalziel peered down from the bridge and it seemed as if the brown depths were full of dead things. Leaves and branches drifting on the surface were all he could see. Presumably fish and other aquatic creatures survived below. Presumably also the floods had killed as they invaded the dry land, hopefully not humans, but livestock and wild animals certainly.

If, thought Dalziel staring down at the turgidly flowing water, if I saw a body floating by, what would I do? Ignore it and go on with my holiday?

He shook his huge head gloomily. He had been wise enough in his life not to bother trying to plumb the depths of his own motivations and make-up, but he knew too well he'd probably risk lumbago, beri-beri and God knows what wading about in this filthy muck to pull the cadaver out, and then he'd hang about to the embarrassment and annoyance of some local jack till he was satisfied of the cause of death. Floods would be a good chance to get rid of some unwanted relative, he thought sagaciously.

No! Sod it! This wouldn't do at all. The holiday was the thing. Fresh air, commune with nature, bathe in beauty, pay homage to history. An English holiday, tired policemen, for the revitalization of.

Any corpse comes floating this way, I'll say Hello sailor, and goodbye, avowed Dalziel and as an act of both symbol and necessity he descended to the water-lapped limit of the bridge, unzipped his flies and began to pee in the flood.

He had just finished when a noise made him look up. It was a long, creaking noise followed by a gentle splash. It came again from behind a wedge-shaped copse of beeches rising stoically from the water about fifty yards to his left. The mist seemed particularly thick here and he strained his eyes in an effort to penetrate the grey barrier. Then through the haze appeared a shape. The sound sequence was heard once more. And into full view glided a rowing-boat. Hastily Dalziel began to fasten his flies.

The boat pulled by him, the oarsman taking long, leisurely strokes. He had the look of an old countryman, weathered and fit, anything between fifty and a hundred but able to row for ever. In the bows, like a reverse figure-head, sat another old man of more determinate age, about seventy, with a profile fit for a Roman coin. But it wasn't either of the men who held Dalziel's eye.

Sitting on the thwart bench was a woman. She was clad all in black, even to a black veil over her face. Her head did not move as she passed, but Dalziel had a feeling that the eyes moved and saw him from behind the veil. So riveting was the tableau in the boat that Dalziel did not instantly take in the most macabre detail of all.

The rowing-boat was towing something behind it, a small flat-bottomed boat.

On it was a coffin.

It was unmistakably a coffin. The brass handles gleamed against the dark mahogany sides and three wreaths splashed white and green along the lid. Even the oarsman's evident expertise could not keep the tow-rope perfectly taut and this strange piece of freight proceeded jerkily, its momentum almost bringing it up to the stern of the rowing-boat at the end of each stroke, as if it were in pursuit. But the woman never turned and Dalziel stood perfectly still, his attitude compounded of astonishment and the conventional deference of one who meets a cortège in the street.

But now a new sound came from behind the copse. Splashes again, but not the soft splashes of expertly wielded oars, and commingled with these were voices chattering and the occasional shout.

Another craft emerged through the mist but if the first could have been created by Lord Tennyson this one owed more to Jerome K. Jerome.

It was a large punt, the kind once used in duck-shooting with a stove-pipe gun mounted in the bows, rusty through neglect and non-use but still menacing for all that. Did they neglect the licence also? wondered Dalziel.

There were six people in the punt, which was perilously low in the water. The gunwale had no more than an inch of clearance at best, and water slopped over the sides with each thrust of the pole by the punter whom Dalziel recognized instantly as his companion in assault the previous evening. The breastless girl was seated in the punt alongside the fat young man, who still wore the same complacent expression. Opposite him was a boy of about sixteen, slim and pensive but with sufficient of the fat youth's features to look as if he had just got out of him. And by the boy's side was a young woman whose straight jet black hair and impassive, high-cheekboned face made Dalziel think of an Indian Maid (Pocahontas in the Board School history book rather than Little Red Wing in the rugby ballad, his only source-texts).

Finally, in the bows, resting nonchalantly against the gun, was a dark, ugly-looking man probably in his twenties, though it was difficult for Dalziel to be certain as the man's black hair seemed to be in a state of insurrection and only the high ground of his nose and the valley of his eyes were putting up any real show of resistance.

Despite the impious exchange of views taking place between the girl and the youth with the pole, it was clear that this vessel was in convoy with the rowing-boat. The nearest any of them got to full mourning was the black turtle-neck sweater worn by the boy, but they had all made an effort. The fat youth wore a black armband around the sleeve of his tweed jacket, the hairy man had a black rosette pinned to his *University of Love* shirt, the Indian Maid wore a white blouse and slacks but looked as if she had been specially carved for a funeral, and the breastless girl had tied a length of black crape round her straw boater. Their only protection against the probable resumption of the rain consisted of two umbrellas and a parasol, carried at the slope by the men, except for the punter whose contribution to the solemnity of the occasion and his own dryness was a black plastic mackintosh under which he seemed to be dressed for cricket. Swimming would have been a sport more suitable, thought Dalziel, watching his efforts at propulsion. Basically, he had a not inelegant style, tossing the pole high and sliding it into the water with a casual flick of strong, supple wrists. The trouble was, deduced Dalziel, that the pole was then plunged two or three feet into sodden earth and his efforts to drag it out acted as a brake, so that the punt moved even more jerkily than the coffin.

The Indian Maid spotted Dalziel first and drew the attention of the others to him. The fat youth said something and they all laughed except the young boy. Dalziel was ready to admit that the sight of a portly gent apparently about to walk in to four feet of water was faintly comic, but none the less laughter in these circumstances struck him as a breach of decorum.

The rowing-boat was now out of sight and Dalziel watched the punt till it too disappeared. Then he walked back over the bridge and tested the depth of the water on the road. It was just within the limits of safety and he edged the car through it with great caution.

The road now rose again, following the skirts of the relatively high ground to his right which acted as a block to the flooded stream. From the crest of this small slope he could see for quite a way. The road dipped once more and about a hundred yards ahead it was flooded for a distance of thirty or forty feet. But presumably thereafter it rose steadily away from flood level, for just on the other side of the water stood a hearse and two funeral cars. The oarsman was in the water, pushing the coffin ashore where the top-hatted undertaker and his assistants were trying to grapple with it without getting their feet wet.

Dalziel halted and once more settled down to watch. Finally all was finished, the punt party reached shore safely, dividing themselves among the two cars, in the first of which the woman and the old man had presumably been seated all along, and the sad procession drove slowly away, leaving only the oarsman seated on the bows of his boat rolling a well-earned cigarette.

When the cortège was out of sight, Dalziel started his car once more and rolled gently down to the trough below, humming 'One More River To Cross'. There was nothing like the sight of someone else's funeral for making life look a little brighter.

Half-way through the trough, he suddenly realized this was much deeper than he had anticipated. At the same moment the engine coughed once and died. Dalziel tried one turn of the starter, then switched off.

Opening the window, he addressed the uninterested oarsman with all the charm and diplomacy he could muster.

'Hey, you!' he shouted. 'Come and give us a push.'

The old boatman looked at him impassively for a moment before he slowly rose and approached. He was wearing gum-boots which came up to his knees but even so the water lapped perilously close to their tops.

When he reached the open window he stopped and looked at Dalziel enquiringly.

'Yes?' he said.

'Don't just stand there,' said Dalziel. 'Give us a push.'

'I hadn't come to push,' said the man. 'I've come to negotiate.'

He proved a hard bargainer, totally uninterested in payment by results. It wasn't till he had folded the pound note Dalziel gave him into a one-inch square and thrust it deep into some safe apparently subcutaneous place that he began to push. The effort was in vain. Finally Dalziel dragged his own scene-of-crime gum-boots out of the chaos in the back of the car and joined him in the water. Slowly the car edged forward but once it reached the upslope its weight combined with the water resistance proved too much.

'Sod it,' said Dalziel.

They sat together on the rowing-boat and smoked. Dalziel had already had the one post-breakfast cigarette he allowed himself nowadays, but he felt the situation was special.

'They'll be coming back soon?' he asked between puffs.

'Half an hour,' said the boatman. 'Not long to put a man in the earth.'

'Good,' said Dalziel. 'I'll beg a lift from the undertaker. Who're they burying?'

'Mr Fielding,' said the boatman.

'Who's he?'

'Mrs Fielding's husband,' was the unhelpful reply.

'Mrs Fielding was in the boat with you?'

Dalziel reached into his pocket, produced the emergency half-bottle he always carried with him in the car, took a long draught and offered it to his companion.

'Ta,' he said, and drank.

'You didn't make that in your garden shed,' he added when he'd finished.

'No. Are you Mrs Fielding's …?'

He let the question hang.

'I work up at the house. Most things that need done and can't be done by lying around talking, I do.'

'I see. Not a bad job if you play your cards right,' said Dalziel with a knowing smirk. 'Have another drink. That was Mrs Fielding's family, was it?'

Why he should have been interested in anything but getting his car out of the flood and back into working order, he did not know. But time had to be passed and the habit of professional curiosity was as hard to change as the habits of smoking or drinking or taking three helpings of potatoes and steamed pudding.

'Most on 'em. The old man's her dad-in-law. Then there's the three children.'

'Which were they?' interrupted Dalziel.

'The two lads, Bertie, that's the older one, him with the gut. Then there's Nigel, the boy. And their sister, Louisa.'

'The thin girl?'

'You've got bloody good eyes, mister,' said the man, taking another drink. 'Must be this stuff.'

'What about the others?'

'Friends. Visitors,' he grunted.

'For the funeral?'

'Oh no. They were here when he snuffed it. Not that it made much difference to 'em, mark you. Not to any on 'em. No. They just carried on.'

'Oh, aye?' said Dalziel, thinking that the trio he had observed in the Lady Hamilton the previous night had hardly comported themselves like grief-stricken mourners.

'What made you take to the water?' he asked. 'Couldn't the funeral cars get round to the house?'

'It'd be a long way round. They checked first thing this morning after last night's rain. Couldn't afford the time. They've a lot of work on in this wet weather. So it was either the boats or wait. And they wanted shot of the coffin quick, you see.'

'Well, I suppose it's a bit deadly having it lying around the house,' said Dalziel charitably.

'Oh yes. Specially when it's on the billiard table,' said the other.

There was no answer to this and they finished their cigarettes in silence.

'What did he die of, anyway?' asked Dalziel, growing tired of the unrelenting lap of water.

'Some say his heart stopped,' said the boatman. 'And some say he was short of breath.'

With difficulty Dalziel restrained himself from bellowing *don't you get funny with me!*

'What do *you* say?' he asked instead.

'Me? What should I know about it?'

He relapsed into a silence which plainly rejected breaking by any conventional social means. Dalziel walked along the water's edge a short way and stood inspecting the punt gun. It had been a formidable weapon, but looked very long disused. While the metal had probably never been bright (why give the poor bloody ducks even a chance of a chance?), now it was rusty and dirty and a spider had spun a few hopeful strands across the muzzle.

It began to rain and after a few moments he returned to the shelter of the car. The boatman ignored his invitation to join him and remained where he was, even his cigarette appearing impervious to the downpour.

Nearly half an hour later the first of the funeral party returned. It was the blond youth, alone and on foot.

'Shit!' said Dalziel and clambered out of the car once more.

'Hello,' said the youth as he approached. 'You're stuck in the water?'

Dalziel smiled his congratulations.

'Yes,' he said. 'Where's the funeral cars?'

'I was just telling Pappy, there's a lot more water on the road about a quarter of a mile round the bend. They weren't very happy about taking their shiny limousines through it on our way to the church and now they reckon it's even deeper, so I was sent on to bring the boats a bit farther along.'

He grinned amiably, apparently unresentful of the task. Dalziel could guess who had elected him to it. Anyone who let a woman punch him on the nose without setting matters right between them very quickly was saddling himself up for a hag-ride.

The boatman was casting off already.

'Hang on,' said Dalziel. 'I'll get my stuff.'

The level of the water seemed perceptibly higher as he waded back to the car and unloaded his old cardboard suitcase. As he returned cautiously to the dry road, he saw to his chagrin that the rowing-boat was already on its way, leaving him to the uncertain mercies of the punt.

‘He’s in a hurry,’ he grunted as he placed his case carefully on one of the seats. The floor looked as if a halfpenny dropped from three feet would blast a hole through it.

‘A devoted retainer,’ said the other with enough of mockery in his voice to give Dalziel some hope for him. ‘I’m Charles Tillotson, by the way.’

‘Andrew Dalziel.’

‘Dee-Ell,’ echoed Tillotson. ‘Dee-Ell. Spelt D-A-L-?’

‘Z-I-E-L,’ finished Dalziel.

‘How impressive to be pronounced differently from the way you are spelt,’ said Tillotson, flourishing the pole. ‘It’s sort of a test for people, isn’t it? Perhaps I should drop the ILL, Totson. What do you think?’

‘How about Tit?’ said Dalziel. ‘Are we going to move or shall we sit here getting wet all bloody day?’

Gingerly he seated himself next to his case and closed his eyes as Tillotson thrust off stylishly, got the pole stuck instantly and almost dislodged himself in his efforts to pull it out.

By the time they had followed the bend of the road and got the rowing-boat back in sight, it had reached the new landing-point and the rest of the party were already embarking. To Dalziel’s dismay the funeral car then began to move off.

‘Hey!’ he bellowed, drawing the attention of the mourners and frightening a small batch of teal who were exploring their new-found territory. But the black limousine purred disdainfully on its way and was soon out of sight.

‘Sod the bastard!’ said Dalziel savagely.

‘Pappy must have forgotten,’ surmised Tillotson.

‘Sod him too.’

Some explanation of his presence must have been required and given on the rowing-boat for when they drew level, no one showed much curiosity about him.

The woman, Mrs Fielding he presumed, was sitting in the stern with the old man. The stout youth had taken an oar and was seated alongside Pappy who returned Dalziel’s accusing gaze blankly. The boy was in the bows, curled up like the Copenhagen mermaid. And the other three were crowded in the flat-bottomed boat lately occupied by the coffin.

‘I think some of you must go back with Charley,’ said Mrs Fielding in a firm, rather deep voice. Her veil was lifted now, revealing a strong almost masculine face which grief and hard weather had only been able to sting to a healthy flush.

‘Oh no,’ protested the thin girl, Louisa. ‘Bertie’s rowing too, and we can’t weigh much more than a coffin.’

‘Nevertheless,’ insisted her mother.

‘I’ll go,’ said the dark hairy man who was taking some shots of the floods with an expensive-looking camera. He stood up and stepped into the punt with the ungainly ease of a sailor.

This seemed to satisfy Mrs Fielding’s distribution problems for the moment. She now addressed Dalziel.

‘I’m sorry the car went before Pappy could speak with the driver. If you’d care to come to the house, you can phone from there. Alternatively, we can leave you here and phone on your behalf.’

The man called Pappy started rowing and Bertie quickly picked up the stroke as Dalziel considered the alternatives. The rain was coming down harder. The occupants of the rowing-boat were concealed almost completely by a carapace of umbrellas which brought to mind the shield-wall of a Viking ship.

Dalziel turned to Tillotson.

‘Follow that boat,’ he said.

3
A Nourishing Broth

The teal had dropped back to the surface and followed at a safe distance.

'I had a friend,' said the ugly man in a pseudo-American accent, 'got badly hurt trying to screw a duck.'

'Oh, yes?'

'Yeah. He had this thing, you know, about having relationships with the whole of creation. But the duck didn't see it that way. Took half his nose off. After that he changed his scheme, went for the spiritual communion thing more, you know.'

'Just as well perhaps,' said Dalziel. 'He might have had trouble with ants.'

The other laughed approvingly.

'That's true, man.'

He thinks he's tested me, thought Dalziel. Now I've passed his little shock test, he'll try to patronize me.

'Charley there, the boy with the wooden whanger, now he goes in more for this kind of kick.'

He squatted behind the punt gun and made firing noises more appropriate to a howitzer.

'No, Hank, you've got it wrong,' protested Tillotson amiably. 'I like a bit of sport, that's all. I say, these floods are rather jolly though. I bet a lot of birds will come back. It must have been fine fowling country, this, before they drained it.'

'See what I mean?' said the other. 'He's just aching to get this old phallic symbol jerking off again.'

At last Dalziel had penetrated through the pseudo-mid-Atlantic flip speech style to a couple of recognizable vowels. He liked to know where he was with people and basic information about background was a good place to start. It gave him something to occupy his mind, to keep out the greyness which threatened to seep in whenever he relaxed.

'Not many ducks in Liverpool,' he said. 'My name's Dalziel. Who're you?'

The dark man looked at him assessingly before replying, 'Hank Uniff.'

Dalziel laughed, a short sharp offensive bark which acknowledged that there hadn't been much chance of his interlocutor being called Jim Smith or Bill Jones.

'Pleased to meet you,' he said. 'How was the funeral?'

'Full of images, man,' said Uniff. 'Hey, Charley, great funeral, huh? I mean, when they dropped the coffin in the hole, well, it was just about waterlogged. Cheerist, what a splash!'

'Yes,' admitted Tillotson as he passed them in practice of his new technique which involved thrusting the pole into the water off the bows and walking the whole length of the punt. It was inevitable, thought Dalziel, that one so obviously born a victim would sooner or later step over the side.

'Yes,' repeated Tillotson, 'it *was* rather like a burial at sea. Full fathom five, Tom Bowling, all that. Did you get some good pictures, Hank?'

'I shot off a whole roll,' replied Uniff. 'But did I get the light right? It wasn't easy to judge and that creepy preacher man didn't help by complaining.'

He cradled his camera protectively as if an attempt were being made to wrest it from his hands.

'Didn't Mrs Fielding object?' queried Dalziel.

'Bonnie? Hell, no. I mean, why, man?'

'Hank's an artist,' explained Tillotson, passing them again at a smart trot. His new technique was certainly moving the punt along much faster, but at the expense of direction if one assumed that the rowing-boat was taking the shortest route home. It was now almost out of sight and several points to the nor'-east.

Dalziel pulled his coat collar more tightly round his neck and resisted the temptation to take charge of the vessel. He was the super-cargo, not the captain. But something of his feelings must have shown to Uniff who grinned maliciously at his discomfiture and began to whistle 'The Skye Boat Song'.

'What kind of artist are you, Mr Uniff?' asked Dalziel.

'What kinds of artist are there, man?' replied Uniff.

'Well,' replied Dalziel, irritated, 'there's con-artists, and there's shit-artists, and there's …'

But his catalogue of abuse was interrupted by the forecast disaster. Tillotson drove the punt forward into a half-submerged hedge, the bows rose in the air, Tillotson screamed and went over the side, Uniff and Dalziel fell together in a tangled heap from which Dalziel recovered just in time to see his suitcase slowly toppling into the water.

Furious, he rose and put his huge hand into the face of Tillotson who was trying to clamber back on board.

'My case!' he yelled. 'Get my bloody case!'

Recognizing that this was an essential condition of readmittance, Tillotson pursued the case which had floated only a few feet but was sinking fast. Dalziel took it out of his hands and tried to drain it as, unassisted, the blond youth dragged himself on board, his exertions freeing the punt from the hedge. Uniff all the while took pictures, including one of the pole which for once had not become embedded in the mud but was floating away at a distance of some twenty feet.

Dalziel banged his case down with a force that nearly brought on a new disaster.

'Mr Dalziel, sir,' said Uniff, still photographing. 'By the ancient laws of the sea, I elect you captain. What now, man? Are you going to run a tight ship?'

Dalziel swallowed the anger which he realized would not be particularly productive at the present time.

'I might just marry you to this goon,' he said, 'and see if you could fuck some sense into him.'

Instead he swung his wellingtoned foot at the narrow planks which formed the cross seat and his fierce onslaught quickly loosened one sufficiently for it to be torn free. Then, using this as a paddle, he sent the punt in pursuit of the pole.

Uniff now put away his camera and rescued the pole from the water. Tillotson with the natural gallantry of the aristocrat offered to resume his post, but Dalziel with the equally natural bluntness of the peasant told him to keep his hands on his knees and his bum on the floor and not to move on peril of his manhood.

Uniff stepped to the back of the punt and with a vigorous driving stroke, which more than made up in efficiency what it lost to Tillotson's in style, he sent the punt scudding over the surface at such a rate that they were only fifty yards behind the rowing-boat as it reached the farther boundary of the water.

There was a lake here, Dalziel surmised, which had overflowed its banks and joined its waters with those of the stream running parallel to the road more than a quarter of a mile behind them. A small landing-stage, waterlogged by the rise in the level of the lake, led to some steps set into a steep sloping garden which rose to a substantial nineteenth-century house in a state of dilapidation not wholly explained even by three days of incessant rain. It was the house he had noticed earlier from the bridge to nowhere and, though close to it lost most of its fairy-tale-castle quality, it still had a solid, fortified look about it.

The other party had disappeared into the house by the time the punt reached the landing-stage and Dalziel did not stand upon ceremony but, using Tillotson's head as a support, he stepped ashore, strode grimly up the garden steps and entered the house without waiting for an invitation. Now he paused, not because of any late revivings of social courtesy but because it was far from clear to him where everyone had disappeared to.

A large entrance hall stretched before him. What might have been elegant wood-panelling had been ruined by the application everywhere of dark brown paint. It was to Dalziel like a nightmarish blow-up of the narrow lobby of his grandmother's house which family loyalties had required must be visited every Sunday although the Presbyterian conscience forbade that anyone should gain pleasure from such a visit. Momentarily he felt like Alice, reduced in scale to a position of total vulnerability.

A door opened. Instead of a monstrous grandmother, Mrs Fielding emerged and made for the staircase.

Dalziel coughed and she stopped.

'Yes?' she said. 'Oh, it's you. There's the telephone. Help yourself.'

She turned to go but Dalziel detained her with another thunderous cough.

'I'd like to dry my things,' he said. 'Get changed. A hot bath would be welcome too.'

She looked at him with puzzled, rather disdainful eyes.

'Look, we're *all* wet, but this isn't a hotel,' she said. 'You might find a towel in the kitchen.'

Again she turned.

'Hold on,' said Dalziel.

She ignored him and started climbing the stairs.

'Look!' he bellowed after her, losing his patience. 'I've been punched on the nose by your daughter, I've been stranded by your boatman, and I've had my case dumped in the water by that long streak of nowt you left in charge of the punt!'

She stopped four stairs up. He couldn't see her face in the shadows, but he got the impression that she was smiling.

'It was your choice to accept the lift,' she said reasonably.

'Lady,' he answered, 'I didn't know what I was doing. But you did. You must have known I'd have had more chance of getting here safely if I'd set out to walk across the blasted water.'

Now she laughed out loud.

'We're warned about turning away angels unawares,' she said. 'I see how easy it could be. Come along, Mr …?'

'Dalziel,' said Dalziel and followed her upstairs, his case leaving a trail of drips which ran parallel to that cast by his sodden coat.

On the landing she paused uncertainly.

'We're a bit crowded at the moment,' she explained. 'It's a big house, but half the bedrooms haven't been used for years. I wonder …'

She opened a door and went in. The room was in darkness but a couple of moments later she opened wide the curtains and beckoned Dalziel in from the threshold.

'You're not superstitious, are you?' she asked. 'This was my husband's room. Well, it's got to be used again, I suppose. You don't mind?'

The last question might have been ironical as Dalziel had already opened his suitcase and begun to empty its damp contents on to the bed.

'Not at all,' he said. 'Very kind.'

'There's a bathroom through that door. It communicates with my room, so if it's locked, it'll be because I'm in there.'

'Thanks,' he said, starting to remove his coat. But she did not leave immediately.

'You said something about being punched on the nose,' she prompted.

'It was nothing,' he said generously. 'A misunderstanding.'

'I see. Well, our children seem determined to be misunderstood, and usually it's someone else who gets hurt. Don't you agree, Mr Dalziel?'

'I'm not married,' said Dalziel, unpeeling his huge sports jacket and revealing broad khaki braces. 'And I've no kids.'

'Oh. The last of the line, Mr Dalziel?' she said.

‘Aye. You could say. Or the end of the tether.’

With neat efficient movements she gathered the damp clothing from the bed, an act of conservation as well as kindness.

‘I’ll see to these,’ she said. ‘You look as though you could do with a hot bath straight away.’

Dalziel was touched by this concern with his health till he saw her gaze fixed on his right hand which had unconsciously unbuttoned his shirt and was presently engaged in scratching his navel.

‘Thanks,’ he said and began to take off his shirt.

The water in the antiquated bathroom was red hot both to the touch and to the sight. Having seen the brown peat water used in the manufacture of the best whisky, Dalziel did not anticipate harm from a little discoloration and wallowed sensuously in the huge marble tub, his feet resting on brass cherubim taps which time and neglect had verdigrised to a satyric green.

From what he had seen so far of the house, he surmised that the Fielding family had been going through bad times. You needed a lot of cash to keep up a place like this these days. This didn’t necessarily mean they were poor, not by his standards. It did mean that probably they had been living beyond their means, or rather that as far as the house was concerned their means had lagged behind their rapidly growing expenditure. He was rather surprised to find himself being so charitable towards the idle rich but whatever the failings of the younger members of the household, Mrs Fielding had struck him as a pleasant intelligent woman. And handsome with it. Not a word much used of female attractiveness nowadays. You couldn’t call loose-haired kids with consumptive eyes and no tits handsome. But Mrs Fielding was. Oh yes.

One of the cherubim seemed to leer at him with unnecessary salaciousness at this point. A trick of the steam. He got out and towelled himself vigorously.

Back in the bedroom he discovered that his tin of foot powder had become a runny blancmange, so he opened the bathroom cabinet in search of a substitute. There was a mixture of male and female cosmetics and a variety of pill bottles. Either Mrs Fielding or her late husband was a bit of a hypochondriac, thought Dalziel. It was difficult to tell from the scrawl on the labels. Even the printed words were difficult. Boots of Piccadilly he could manage. But Propananol … could that be for athlete’s foot? Piles, more likely. There was a tap on the communicating door.

‘Just finishing,’ he called.

‘Your trousers were soaking,’ Mrs Fielding answered, ‘so I’ve put them with the rest to dry. You’ll find some things in the wardrobe to wear for the time being if you like. There’re hot drinks downstairs.’

‘Ta,’ he called. A kind and thoughtful woman, he decided. Once she had made up her mind to be welcoming she carried it through.

Mr Fielding had clearly not been as fat as Dalziel but he had been tall and broad-shouldered. The trousers wouldn’t fasten at the waist, but a long nylon sweater stretched over the cabriole curve of his belly and covered the shameful schism. An old sports jacket, also unfastenable, and a pair of carpet slippers completed the robing and it was time to descend.

Downstairs no sounds offered him a clue to the location of the hot drinks, but after three false starts he at last opened a door into an inhabited room.

‘Who the devil are you?’ demanded the old man, glaring at him through the steam rising from a mug held at his thin bluish lips.

‘Andrew Dalziel. I was given a lift. My car broke down. Can I have some of that?’

He advanced to the broad kitchen table on whose scrubbed wooden top stood a steaming jug.

‘No. That’s mine. You’ll find some on the hob through there.’

There was the adjacent back kitchen where on a gas stove coeval almost with the house Dalziel found a pan of what his mother would have called ‘nourishing broth’.

He plucked a large mug from a hook on the wall, filled it and tasted. It was good.

He returned to the other room. Probably nowadays an estate agent would call it a breakfast-room, but the plain wooden furniture pre-dated the studied pseudo-simplicities of modern Scandinavian pine. These chairs threatened real painful splinters to the unwary. Dalziel sat down cautiously.

'Those are my son's clothes you're wearing!' exclaimed the old man. 'I recognize them. Even the slippers. Ye gods, ye gods, how little time it takes!'

'My clothes were wet,' explained Dalziel, thinking that someone ought to have persuaded the old man also to a change of clothing. The raincoat and umbrella had not been able to protect the bottom of his trousers and his shoes from a soaking.

'I'm sorry about your son,' he said.

'Why? Did you know him?'

'No. How could I? I'm here by accident.'

'So you say. So you say. Men come, men go, and it's all put down to accident. Have you known Bonnie long?'

'Your daughter-in-law? I don't know her at all, Mr Fielding,' averred Dalziel. 'I don't know anyone here.'

'No?' The emphasis of Dalziel's answer seemed almost to convince the old man. But only for a moment.

'You're not from Gumbelow's, are you?' he suddenly demanded. 'Or television? I have positively interdicted television.'

Dalziel's patience was wearing thin, but now the door opened and the stout youth who must be Bertie Fielding came in. He ignored the inmates and passed straight through into the back kitchen, returning a moment later to stare accusingly at Dalziel.

'That's my mug. You've taken my mug.'

Dalziel blew on his soup till he set the little globules of fat into a panicky motion.

'Sorry,' he said.

Bertie turned once more and went back to the stove.

'My grandson is an ill-mannered lout,' said Mr Fielding sadly.

'Can't think where he gets it from,' answered Dalziel.

Bertie returned, drinking soup from what appeared to be an identical mug.

'I hear Charley sank your case,' he said, more amicably now. Like a baby who doesn't really mind what teat gets stuck in his mouth, thought Dalziel.

'Mr Tillotson? Aye, there was a spot of bother,' he answered.

'There would be,' said Bertie maliciously. 'Evidence of divine whimsy is Charley. Looks like a Greek god but things happen to him like Monsieur Hulot.'

'You haven't quite got the balance right,' mocked Mr Fielding, explaining to Dalziel, 'Bertie likes to rehearse his witty abuse till he's got the lines off pat.'

Bertie smiled angrily.

'Still can't bear a rival near the throne, Grandpa?'

'Rival?' exclaimed the old man, pushing himself upright. 'When has the eagle considered the boiling fowl a rival? Or the antelope the hog? Good day to you, Mr Dalziel. If you are as uninvolved in our affairs as you claim to be, it seems unlikely that we shall meet again. On the other hand …'

He walked stiffly from the room, his shoes squelching gently on the stone-flagged floor.

'Your grandfather seems a bit upset,' probed Dalziel, sucking in a noisy mouthful of broth.

'Yes, he usually does, these days. It's not surprising, I suppose, when you've lost your last surviving child. Especially as he thinks I killed him.'

The door opened again at this point and the arrival of Tillotson, Louisa Fielding, Uniff and the Indian Maid masked Dalziel's surprise and prevented him from following up Bertie's statement.

'Hello,' said Tillotson. 'I say, are your things all right? I hope there's no permanent damage.'

'If there is,' said Dalziel, 'I'll send you a bill.'

'That's right, captain,' said Uniff. 'Don't let him polite talk you out of your legal rights. I'm a witness. Hey, Mavis!'

The Indian Maid came over to them with two mugs of soup. She was really a striking girl with much of Uniff's prominence of feature, but regularized into something approaching beauty. The likeness was confirmed when Uniff said, 'Mave, meet the captain. Assumed command in our hour of need. Captain, may I present my sister?'

'How do you do, Mr Dalziel,' said the girl. Her voice confirmed his assessment of Uniff's origins. It was unrepentantly Liverpudlian.

'Pleased to meet you,' said Dalziel.

'It was you we saw on the bridge, wasn't it? You looked as if you were going to walk into the water.'

'Or on it,' said Uniff. 'The second coming, nineteen-seventy style.'

'He hasn't had much luck stilling the waters this time,' said Bertie, peering out of the chintz-curtained window.

The door opened once more and Mrs Fielding came in.

'Everyone here? Good. Is there plenty of soup to go round? I can't see Herrie. Or Nigel.'

'Grandpa was here. But Nigel hasn't been down, has he?'

Bertie looked enquiringly at Dalziel who shook his head.

'I hope he's not moving around in his damp clothes,' said Mrs Fielding. 'Lou, darling, run upstairs and find him. Make him come down.'

'But I've not had my soup yet,' protested the blonde girl. 'Bertie can go. He's nearly finished.'

'He'll take no notice of Bertie,' her mother answered firmly. 'Or worse, even if he was on the point of coming Bertie would make him change his mind. You go.'

'Oh bugger,' said Louisa. But she went.

Mrs Fielding came over to the table now and smiled down at Dalziel.

'I just rang the garage,' she said.

'I'm sorry, you shouldn't have bothered, I was just going to,' answered Dalziel.

'No, it struck me you wouldn't know which was nearest or best for that matter. Anyway they were a bit worried when I told them where the car was. There's a great deal of water all along that road now and they aren't sure their breakdown truck can get along. Once it stops raining the water will go down pretty quickly, of course.'

'So I'm stuck,' said Dalziel. 'Well, that's life. Well, if I can use your phone, I'll try to find myself a hotel and a taxi. How close can a taxi get?'

'He's worried about another trip with Charley,' said Bertie Fielding. 'Be comforted, it's just on the south side that the water lies, Mr Dalziel. The road to the north is a bit damp, but passable. I'd say the Lady Hamilton in Orburn would be your best bet, wouldn't you, Mother?'

Dalziel groaned inwardly, visualizing the under-manager's mixture of dismay and triumph at his return.

'Nonsense, Bertie,' she replied. 'It's expensive, unhygienic, and nearly ten miles away. Mr Dalziel will stay with us until he can pick up his car. Please do, Mr Dalziel. We would all be delighted to have you.'

Dalziel looked slowly round the room and saw delight manifest itself in a variety of strange ways. It masqueraded as indifference on Mavis's face, amused knowingness on her brother's, vague uncertainty on Tillotson's and downright dislike of the idea on Bertie's. Only on Bonnie Fielding's did delight appear in anything approaching full frontal nudity.

'I'd be delighted to stay,' said Dalziel.

'Mother,' said Louisa from the door.

'Hello, darling. Did you find Nigel?'

‘No, but I found this in his bedroom.’ She held up a piece of paper.
‘The little sod’s taken off again.’

4
Premises, Premises

The general atmosphere of resigned annoyance told Dalziel he was in the middle of a routine upset rather than a major disaster. Nigel, it seemed, had left home to seek his fortune on several previous occasions. Looking at the flaking paint and faded wallpaper around him, Dalziel felt that perhaps the boy had a point. It would take a fool or a clairvoyant to seek a fortune here.

The current weather, however, added a new dimension of concern to this latest escape, for his mother at least. His brother and sister seemed completely unworried, though the Uniffs whether out of sympathy or politeness were much more helpful.

'He can't have gotten far,' said Hank. 'Poor kid. He'll soon have his bellyful of this rain.'

It was not the most diplomatic use of the idiom. Quickly Mavis stepped in.

'Hank, take a look outside. He might be sheltering quite close. If not, we'll take a run down the road in the car.'

Hank left, and Mrs Fielding sat down at the table. She appeared quite composed now.

'Lou, darling,' she said. 'How's the soup? Nigel will be freezing when he gets back.'

'There's oodles left,' said Bertie. 'We're hardly down below yesterday's tide mark.'

'I like it best when we reach that ox-tail we had at New Year,' said Louisa. 'That was my favourite.'

Indifferent to this family humour, Dalziel picked up the note which Mrs Fielding had dropped on the table.

I am leaving home because (1) my plans for the future don't coincide with yours (2) I have no desire to live off money coined by my father's death and (3) there are some people I don't care to have near me. Nigel. PS. I don't mean you. I'll write when I'm settled.

He turned it over. It was addressed to the boy's mother.

Hank returned.

'Any sign?' asked Mavis.

'No. But the rowing-boat's gone.'

'He always threatened to run away to sea,' said Louisa.

'Lou, shut up, will you?' said Mrs Fielding. 'Oh damn. I wish he hadn't taken the boat. I don't like the thought of him on the water.'

'Shall I go after him in the punt?' volunteered Tillotson, a suggestion which drew derisive groans from everyone except Mrs Fielding and Mavis. And Dalziel too, though he groaned internally.

'Thank you, Charles, but no,' said Mrs Fielding. 'Hank, did you see Pappy out there?'

'Not a sign,' said Uniff.

'See if you can find him and tell him Nigel's loose again. Then perhaps you'll join us in the study. It's time to talk.'

Uniff left and the other young people drifted out after him. When Mrs Fielding spoke, Dalziel noted approvingly, the others jumped. He liked a strong leader.

'I'm sorry to leave you alone, Mr Dalziel,' she said. 'But we have to have a business conference. Make yourself at home.'

'Thanks,' he said. 'I'll keep the soup hot for Nigel.'

'That boy. You must think us very odd.'

Dalziel did not deny it.

'He sounds a sensible lad,' he said, indicating the note.

'You think that's sensible?' she asked, surprised.

'Well, it's neatly laid out. One, two, three. I like that,' he said with the authority of one whose own official reports were infamous for their brevity. *I came, I saw, I arrested* was the Dalziel ideal according to Pascoe.

'It's possible to be methodical and still find trouble,' she answered. 'There's probably a cold joint in the pantry if you're hungry. We usually eat on our feet during the day and sit down for a meal about six-thirty.'

She left and Dalziel glanced at his watch. It was one o'clock. Five hours.

He went into the kitchen in search of food. There was a small deep freeze into which he peered hopefully. It contained very little and nothing of particular appeal. He shuffled the contents around in the hope of coming across one of his favourite frozen dinners-for-two, but there was no sign of such delights. One foil-wrapped package caught his eye. The remnants of a cold joint perhaps. He unwrapped it.

'Well bugger me!' said Dalziel.

Inside the foil, sealed in a transparent plastic bag, was a dead rat.

These sods might be hard up but there were limits, he told himself. Gingerly he re-interred the corpse in its icy tomb and closed the lid.

His appetite had left him for the moment so he lit a cigarette and sat down once more to muse upon this odd household.

Just how odd was it? he asked himself. Well, the atmosphere for a start. It didn't feel very funereal. Not that that signified much. He'd been at funerals where by the time the poor sod was planted, half the mourners were paralytic and the rest were lining up for the return to the loved one's house like homesteaders at the start of a land-race.

Anyway atmosphere was too vague. You could breakfast on atmosphere, but you'd better make your dinner out of facts.

Fact one was the age of the non-Fieldings. Coeval with Bertie and Louisa, they were hardly the mourners one would expect at the funeral of a man of Fielding's assumed age.

Fact two was this business conference going on. What were they doing – reading the will? Not likely these days. Then what?

Fact three was the lad, Nigel. His farewell note hinted at household relationships more turbulent than the usual teenage antipathies.

Fact four was the enigmatic remarks people kept dropping about Fielding's death.

And fact five was a freezer with a dead rat in it.

He stood up and dropped his fag end into Bertie's mug. When it came down to it, he distrusted facts almost as much as atmosphere. He knew at least three innocent men who would be bashing their bishops in Her Majesty's prisons for many years to come because of so-called *facts*. On the other hand, on other occasions other *facts* had saved all three from well-deserved sentences. We are in God's hands.

So he abandoned facts and set off on a walkabout of the house hoping to encounter truth.

He strolled along the brown horror of the entrance hall opening doors at random. One room contained a full-size billiard table, presumably the one on which the coffin had rested. There were two or three balls on the table and a cue leaned up against a pocket. Someone had not waited long to resume playing.

Dalziel moved on and reached the next door just as a telephone rang inside.

'Hello!' said old Fielding's reedy but still imperious voice. 'Yes. This is Hereward Fielding speaking.'

So that's what 'Herrie' was short for. Jesus wept!

He remained at the door. He was firmly of the conviction that if you didn't have enough sense to lower your voice, then you either wanted or deserved to be overheard.

'No, I will not change my mind,' said Fielding. 'And I am too old to be bribed, persuaded or flattered into doing so. Now please, leave me alone. I have just buried my son today, yes, my son. Spare me your sympathy. You may come tomorrow if you wish, but I make no promises about my availability. Good day.'

The phone was replaced with a loud click. Dalziel pushed open the door and entered.

The room was large and ugly, its furnishings and decoration old enough to be tatty without getting anywhere near the ever-shifting bourne of the antique. Fielding had turned from the telephone to a wall cabinet, the door of which seemed to be jammed. He glanced up at Dalziel.

'Oh, it's you,' he said, heaving. The door flew open and a glass unbalanced and fell to the threadbare carpet. He ignored it, but plucked another from inside and with it a bottle. Dalziel fixed his gaze on this. It took a strong man to stand with a bottle in one hand, a glass in the other, and not offer him a drink.

'Can I help you?' asked Fielding.

'No. The others seem to be in conference and I was just having a look around,' said Dalziel.

'Were you? Well, this room, by general consensus the coldest and draughtiest in this cold and draughty house, is sometimes regarded as my sitting-room. Though naturally should anyone else wish to eat, drink, sleep, play records, make love or merely take a walk in it, my selfish demands for privacy are not allowed to get in the way.'

'That's good of you,' said Dalziel heartily, closing the door behind him. 'Terrible, this weather. I pity all the poor sods on holiday.'

'I understood *you* were on holiday,' said Fielding, filling his glass.

'So I am,' said Dalziel, mildly surprised at the idea. 'Pity me then. Yes, it's still chucking it down. I hope your grandson's all right.'

'What?'

'Your grandson. He's run away, I believe. I'm sorry, didn't you know?'

The old man took a long swallow from his glass. What was it? wondered Dalziel. He couldn't see the label which was obscured by Fielding's long bony fingers, but the liquid was an attractive pale amber.

'It would be too optimistic to hope you might mean Bertie?' said Fielding.

'No. The lad. Nigel.'

'I feared so. It was ever thus. Wilde was wrong. You don't have to kill the things you love. Just wait long enough and they'll go away.'

'Who?' said Dalziel, pouncing on this further reference to killing and wanting to get its provenance right.

'Who? You mean, who … Oscar Wilde. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol.'*

'Oh, the poof,' said Dalziel, his interest evaporating.

Unexpectedly Fielding laughed.

'That's the one,' he said. 'Will you have a drink, Mr …?'

'Dalziel. Yes, I will.' Here's another one who thinks he's summed me up and can start patronizing me, thought Dalziel as his huge hand held the glass he had retrieved from the floor steadfastly under the bottle till the meniscus touched the rim and Fielding said ironically, 'Say when.'

It was brandy, a cheap brand Dalziel suspected, not from any connoisseurship of the liquor but by simple taste-bud comparison with the smoothness of his own favourite malt whisky. Something of his reaction must have shown and he realized he had inadvertently got back at Fielding for his suspected condescension when the old man said, 'I'm sorry, it's not good, but these days we all have to make sacrifices.'

'It's fine. Just the job for this weather,' said Dalziel, emptying his glass and proffering it for a refill.

'The weather. Yes. That foolish boy. I hope he will be all right. He never goes far, at least he didn't when Conrad – that's his father, my son – was alive.'

'Fond of his dad, was he?'

'Very,' said the old man firmly.

'But he still ran away, even then?'

'Certainly. It's in the family. Conrad was always taking off when he was a boy. I myself ran off to join the Army in 1914. I was sixteen at the time.'

'Did they take you?' asked Dalziel.

'Not then. I looked very young. We *were* younger then, you know. Balls dropping, menstruation, it all happened later in my generation. But now they seem to need jockstraps and brassieres in the cradle.'

Fielding laughed harshly.

'Anyway, it was a blessing I see now. I went legally and forcibly in 1916 and within six months I was ready to run away again, home this time.'

'It must have been terrible,' said Dalziel with spurious sympathy. 'All that mud.'

'Mud? Oh no. I didn't mean the trenches. I never really saw the trenches. It was just the sheer boredom of the whole thing that made me want to run away. Very unfashionable. I wrote a book about my experiences a few years after the war. A light, comic thing, it went down well enough with your general reader, but it put me in bad with the intelligentsia for the next decade. But then I did a bit of Eliot-bashing and that was a help. Even so, I still got the cold shoulder, more or less, until the fifties. After that it was just a question of survival. Hang on long enough and you're bound to become a Grand Old Man. Like the essays Paul Pennyfeather set in *Decline and Fall*. The reward is for length, regardless of merit.'

He laughed again, a series of glottally-stopped cracks, like a night-stick rattling along metal railings. Dalziel contemplated making him laboriously explain what he had just said, sentence by sentence, but decided against it on the grounds that the poor old sod probably couldn't help himself.

'So you're not too worried about the boy?'

'In the sense that he is too sensible to contribute willingly to his own harm, no. But as you say, the weather is appalling and, in addition, we live in troubled times, Mr Dalziel. The post-war period is an age of unbalance, of violence. Women and children cannot wander around with impunity as in my boyhood. Even the police seem more likely to be a source of molestation than a protection against it.'

'They've a hard job,' said Dalziel mildly.

'I dare say. They certainly make hard work of finding an answer to the crime wave.'

'Oh, the answer's simple,' said Dalziel. 'Charge two guineas a pint for petrol, have a dusk to dawn curfew, and deport regular offenders to Manchester.'

It was a Yorkshire joke. Fielding was not very amused.

'It's in man's mind, not his motorways, that the answer lies,' he said reprovingly. 'Has Bonnie organized a search for Nigel? No, you said they were in conference, didn't you? Conference! You see how this house is run, Mr Dalziel!'

Dalziel felt impelled to defend Bonnie Fielding.

'The man, Pappy, has been warned to keep look-out. The lad took the boat, it seems.'

'Worse and worse,' said the old man angrily. 'That fool Papworth is totally unreliable. Let's go and find him and you'll see.'

He drained his glass and led the way out at a pace which had Dalziel's borrowed carpet slippers flip-flopping on the uncarpeted floor.

Dalziel paused in the hallway as he heard the sound of raised voices drifting down the stairs. Someone, it sounded like Bertie, was shouting angrily and other voices mingled in the background.

'Come on!' commanded Fielding, irritated by the delay, and obediently Dalziel followed him through a door which led into a new complex of meaner corridors running through what presumably had once been the servants' quarters.

Fielding strode on ahead till he reached a door on which he rapped imperiously. Then without waiting for a reply, he flung it open with an aplomb which won Dalziel's professional admiration.

The room looked as if it had been furnished from an army surplus sale. The metal bed was made up with a neatness that invited inspection and the objects on the bedside locker – ashtray, alarm clock and a box of matches – were placed at the corners of an isosceles triangle.

Pappy was not there and in an almost unconscious reflex Dalziel stepped into the room and opened the metal wardrobe. It contained a couple of jackets and an old but well preserved black suit.

Glancing round, he realized that Fielding was regarding him strangely. Bursting into a servant's room was evidently OK, but searching it was something else.

'He's not here then,' said Dalziel.

'No. I doubt if he spends a great deal of time in the wardrobe.'

'Perhaps he's out looking.'

'Hah!' snorted Fielding, setting off again. Dalziel followed after glancing out of the window. It was still raining and the cobbled yard which lay outside was inches deep in water so that it looked like a sea of semolina. For the second time since coming into this house, Dalziel felt a sense of physical belittlement.

Fielding was knocking on another door now, more gently this time and without trying the handle. A woman's voice answered from within.

'Who is it?'

'Mr Fielding. Sorry to trouble you, Mrs Greave, but I'm looking for Papworth. Do you know where he is?'

After a short interval, the door was opened by a bright-eyed woman of about forty, whose magenta-tinted hair and green dressing-gown wound tight around her body gave her the look of a cornfield poppy. She was not unattractive in a bold and brassy kind of way.

'I was having a nap,' she said with more of accusation than explanation in her voice.

'I'm sorry,' said Fielding. 'Do you know where Papworth is?'

'No,' said the woman yawning, showing good teeth in a moist pink mouth. Her glance flickered towards Dalziel who looked her up and down from her bare feet to the untidy brightness of her hair and leered grotesquely at her. Dalziel's leer was so unambiguous that it was like a lesser man exposing himself. Mrs Greave screwed up her mouth in distaste and said, 'Sorry, I've no idea. I'd better start thinking about dinner, I suppose, so if you'll excuse me.'

She began to close the door but Dalziel leaned forward so that his belly curved into the doorway. It was more subtle than putting your foot in the jamb.

Sniffing noisily, he said, 'Is something burning?'

The woman half turned, then swung back again to prevent Dalziel from entering the room.

'No,' she said, and swung the door to so violently that he had to skip back to avoid a collision. But he smiled to himself as they moved on. He had penetrated far enough to see a man's suede shoe lying on the floor. It looked wet.

'So she's the cook, is she?' he asked.

'So rumour has it,' said Fielding drily. 'It was probably the dinner you smelt burning.'

Dalziel laughed. It was turning out to be a very interesting household, this. It had to be Papworth who was in the woman's room. Perhaps he was just taking evasive action. With this old fusspot on the prowl, who could blame him? Though, of course, you didn't need to take your shoes off to hide.

'Papworth's knocking her off, is he?' he said, voicing his thought.

'Who?'

'Mrs Greave. The cook.'

Fielding laughed again.

'I hope not,' he said. 'She's his daughter!'

'His daughter?' echoed Dalziel. 'You're sure?'

'No one can ever be sure of their father,' said Fielding. 'We believe what we're told, don't we? Come on. We might find him in the Hall.'

It seemed that this hunt for Papworth was becoming an obsession with the old man. Dalziel's own enthusiasm had waned, partly because he still had not discarded his theory about Papworth's whereabouts (a man could visit his daughter in her bedroom, couldn't he?) but mainly because Fielding now proposed that they should go out into the rain-filled yard.

'Hold on,' he said at the door. 'Where are we going?'

'Just over there,' said Fielding, pointing to a long high-roofed building which ran out from the main house. It looked as if it might once have been a stables, but surprisingly, in this neglected house, this particular block looked as if someone had been working on it fairly recently, an impression confirmed by the wording on a sign propped against the wall. *Gibb and Fowler, Building Contractors, Orburn*.

'It joins up with the house,' said Dalziel reasonably. 'Can't we get into it without going outside?'

'If you must,' said the old man crossly, shutting the door.

Their route this time took them through a new world in the form of a large room (or perhaps two or three rooms knocked into one) where the old stone walls had been plastered and painted a brilliant blue. On one side were a pair of large freezers and on the other, gleaming in silver and white, a row of microwave ovens. It was like stepping out of a bus shelter into a space ship.

'What's all this?' asked Dalziel in bewilderment.

'We drink a lot of soup,' said Fielding, not stopping to offer further explanation but pressing on through the room with unflagging speed.

Dalziel followed down another short corridor, then into the building which was the object of Fielding's forced march.

Here he halted and let his eyes get used to the dim light filtering through the narrow arched windows. If the microwave ovens had been a step forward out of the nineteenth century, what was going on here was just as determined a step back.

The building had been a stables, he reckoned, with an upper floor used perhaps as a hay-loft. This floor had now been removed with the exception of a small section at the far end which had been transformed into a kind of minstrels' gallery. The joists supporting the arched roof had clearly lacked something in antiquity and they were being supplemented by a new fishbone pattern of age-blackened beams, standing out starkly against the white-washed interstices. Dalziel rapped his knuckles against one of these beams which was leaning against the wall, prior to elevation. It rang hollowly and felt smooth and cold to the touch. Dalziel was not repelled. He had nothing against plastic. He would as lief eat off colourful Formica as polished mahogany. Nor did it seem distasteful to him that the panes of stained 'glass' which were being fitted into the windows were plastic also. His reaction was one of simple puzzlement.

To what end would the Fieldings be transforming an old stables into something that looked like a set for a remake of *Robin Hood*?

Old Fielding, having peered into various recesses and through various doors, now abandoned his search for Papworth and returned to enjoy Dalziel's bewilderment.

'What do you think of this?' he asked, gesturing with a flamboyance more in keeping with his surroundings than his person. 'Is it not a fit monument for our times? What would Pope have had to say?'

'Monument?' said Dalziel, wondering momentarily if the old man was being literal and this place was indeed intended to be some sort of mausoleum, a kind of bourgeois Taj Mahal. But what about the ovens?

The answer was obvious.

'It's a café,' said Dalziel.

This solution sent the old man into paroxysms of laughter which modulated into a coughing bout from which it seemed unlikely he would recover. Dalziel watched for a moment coldly, then administered a slap between his shoulder-blades which brought the dust up out of the old man's jacket and sent him staggering against a section of stone reproduction wall which gave visibly.

'Thank you,' said Fielding. 'Though I fear the cure was more dangerous than the disease. Well now. A café. Yes, that's the word. Not the word that will be used, of course, should this sad enterprise ever come to fruition. No. Then this place will be called a *Banqueting Hall*. My daughter-in-law is too careful, I think, to risk the penalties prescribed under the Trades Descriptions Act by calling it a Medieval Banqueting Hall, but the word "medieval" will certainly appear somewhere on the prospectus.'

'People will eat here,' said Dalziel.

The prospect did not displease him. Eating was one of the Four Deadly Pleasures. Though he could not see the necessity for all these trappings. A meal was a meal.

'That's right. A dagger and a wooden platter. At a given signal, chicken legs will be thrown over the right shoulder. It's a pastime very popular I believe in the North-East where the past is still close and tribal memories are long. My foolish family believe the inhabitants of Orburn and district will be equally gullible. The dreadful thing is, they may be right.'

'There's still a bit of work to be done,' observed Dalziel. 'Where are the builders today?'

'They would not come today,' said the old man significantly.

'No? Oh, of course. Sorry. The funeral.'

Fielding laughed again, but this time, with a wary eye on Dalziel's hand, he kept it to a controlled barking.

'Builders are not noted for their delicacy, Mr Dalziel, not here, anyway.'

Dalziel ran his mind's eye down a list of building contractors working in his area and had to agree.

'What then? The weather?'

'Money, Mr Dalziel. When the head goose has been killed, you make damn sure someone else is going to start dropping the golden eggs.'

'Ah,' said Dalziel. 'Then this business conference …?'

But his cross-examination was interrupted.

'You are looking for me, Mr Fielding?' said a voice from above.

They looked up. Leaning over the rail of the minstrels' gallery was Papworth.

'There you are,' said Fielding. 'About time too. Have you seen anything of my grandson yet? Young Nigel?'

'No,' said Papworth. 'Should I have done?'

'Don't you know he's missing? Hasn't anyone told you?' demanded Fielding.

'No,' said Papworth. 'I've been busy. What's the fuss?'

'The boy's run off again. It seems he's taken the rowing-boat and naturally we are all very worried.'

'The rowing-boat,' said Papworth thoughtfully.

'That's right, man. Aren't you going to do anything? You can take the punt out and scout around, if you are not too busy, that is.'

You didn't have to be a detective to spot the dislike the old man felt for Papworth, thought Dalziel. If only all relationships were so clear!

'No. That's just what I was going to do when I heard you wanted me,' said Papworth.

'But you said you didn't know the boy was missing,' interjected Dalziel.

'No. But the boat is. Or was.'

‘Was?’

‘Yes. I can see it drifting out beyond the island. But one thing’s certain. There’s no one in it.’

5
A Pleasant Surprise

For the second time that day, the three men got soaking wet. Papworth seemed impervious to the rain as he propelled the gun-punt over the water with strong economical strokes, but Dalziel was concerned about the old man who had rejected all attempts to make him stay ashore. His clothes were clinging to his body, accentuating its frailty, and the skin of his face seemed to have shrunk in the downpour and be clinging almost transparently to his patrician skull.

Dalziel himself drew comfort from the thought that this time at least it was not his own clothes that were getting wet. There was a philosophy in there somewhere if he had the time or energy to winkle it out. Or a rule of life at least. He was dimly aware that his blacker moments were often survived only because he had certain usually unspecified and often arbitrary rules of life to cling on to, though whether these added up to the weight and dignity of something called a *philosophy* he did not know. Duty was one of them, or at least the notion that a man got out of bed and went to his work no matter what he felt like, and saw the job through if he could manage it without collapsing. It had proved a useful and necessary rule in recent weeks.

The rowing-boat was drifting with one oar missing and the other trailing from the rowlock. The island referred to by Papworth was, Dalziel realized, a real island in the real lake, with water lapping shallowly at the roots of the trees growing there. It would be possible to land here still at the expense only of getting your feet wet, and he scanned the trees closely. They were willows mainly, packed tight together as though drawing back from the threatening waters, but the total area of the island couldn't have been more than a quarter-acre and he felt pretty certain that Nigel was not lurking there, watching them pass.

Nor was the boy in the boat. Papworth had asserted it was empty from the start, but Dalziel had not been so positive. You could lie in the bottom of a boat and not be seen from the shore, he suspected. But the boy was not in it and suddenly the dimensions of the problem had changed.

Papworth jumped lightly into the boat and pulled the trailing oar inboard. From the punt Dalziel examined the rowing-bench closely, looking for he did not know what.

'Where's it come from?' he demanded.

'God knows,' said Papworth with a shrug.

'Can't you tell?' said Dalziel.

'They don't leave tracks,' said Papworth. 'And there's no regular currents, tides, that sort of thing here. No, the wind'd move it most, and *you* tell *me* which quarter that's in.'

He was right. What wind there was gusted fitfully from no constant direction.

Old Fielding who had been uncharacteristically quiet ever since they had left the shore now said, 'There's an oar missing. Surely if we can find that, it will give us a clue.'

'Mebbe,' said Papworth laconically. 'But to what?'

'Listen,' said Dalziel, glowering at the impassive boatman. 'There's three things. The boat could have drifted back from wherever Nigel got off; or it could just have drifted away from the landing-stage in the first place and the boy's on the road; or if he did have a spot of trouble he could be stranded on a tree or on top of a hedge or something. He can swim, can't he?'

'Like a fish,' said Fielding.

'Right then,' said Dalziel, standing so that the punt rocked dangerously. He ignored the movement and scanned the waters. It was pretty obvious where the lake proper ended and the floods began. A line of trees and half-submerged undergrowth delineated the sweep of the farther bank and, beyond this, the geometric outlines of fields were marked where their hedges broke the surface of the water.

'OK,' said Dalziel. 'Shout.'

'What?'

'Shout,' he said. 'If he is stuck somewhere, he'll answer.'

They started to shout, sometimes separately and sometimes with Fielding's reedy tenor, Papworth's strong baritone and Dalziel's totally unmusical bellow blending into a single dreadful cry. The damp air absorbed all their effort with indifferent ease and returned nothing.

'Let's try a bit farther out,' said Dalziel finally, reaching for the punt pole. But as he did so, he realized their yellings had not gone entirely unheard. Standing in the garden near the flooded landing-stage were the rest of the Fieldings and Tillotson. He guessed what anxieties were swarming through Bonnie's mind and spoke to Papworth.

'We'd best let Mrs Fielding know what's going on,' he said. 'Can you scout a bit farther in that thing while I take the punt back?'

'If you like,' said Papworth. He removed the oar from the thole-pin and using it as a rather cumbersome paddle began to move away.

'Where's that fellow going?' demanded Fielding. He looked to be in the extremities of distress, both physical and mental. Even without his daughter-in-law's right to an explanation, it would have been necessary to get him back to the house soon.

'He's going to search,' said Dalziel, wielding the pole inexpertly and for the first time feeling some sympathy for Tillotson. 'We'd better get back to the house and organize things there.'

Mrs Fielding remained controlled when she heard what Dalziel had to say, but he sensed a strong underlying concern.

'Let's get inside,' she said. 'Herrie, you're soaking! What possessed you to go out in only your jacket?'

She gave a half-accusing glance at Dalziel. She had the kind of solid, bold-eyed face much admired by the Edwardians and which had still stared provocatively at an adolescent Dalziel from Scarborough What-the-Butler-Saw machines a couple of decades later. He felt an in the circumstances incongruous urge to wink invitingly.

Surprisingly in the light of her earlier indifference, Louisa was outwardly the most agitated.

'We can't just hang about, doing nothing,' she cried. 'Let's get something organized.'

Her urgency seemed to infect the others and her mother and brother began to move back to the house at an accelerated pace almost beyond the means of the old man who hung on to his daughter-in-law with the stoic look of one who is ready at a moment's notice to make his final exit.

Dalziel followed, eager to get out of the rain but without any feeling of urgency. He doubted whether speed was going to contribute much to Nigel Fielding's safety now. Either the lad was safe or his body was waiting to be grappled from the water by a boat-hook. But the illusion of great activity was a useful anodyne.

The Uniffs who had had enough sense to stay out of the wet met them at the door and received explanations in the hall.

Mavis displayed the same calm competence as before and even Hank made conventional soothing noises, putting his arm round Louisa's thin shoulders and pressing his *University of Love* T-shirt (the same one? or did he have duplicates?) against her soaking sweater whose new skin-clinging properties managed the merest hint of a female figure.

'We must ring the police,' she said. Dalziel sighed and prepared to step forward to reveal himself. It would be unprofessional to let this short-tempered girl give her unstructured and semi-hysterical account of the situation to the local bobby when he could get things moving in half the time.

'Perhaps,' he began. And the telephone rang. For a moment they all froze. It was Bonnie Fielding who was quickest off the mark, heading for the room which old Fielding claimed as his own.

They heard her pick up the phone.

'Nigel!' she exclaimed.

'Yes,' she said, as the rest of them crowded into the room. 'Yes. Look, Nigel, where are … no … oh, damn!'

It was clear from her face that the boy had rung off.

'Where is he?' demanded Fielding.

'I'm sorry, Herrie,' said the woman. 'But he didn't say. Just that he wanted us to know he was OK. He saw the boat go adrift after he'd abandoned it and thought I'd be worried. Anyway, thank God he's safe. Now, Herrie, let's see about you before you get pneumonia.'

She ushered the old man out of the room, and though the news of his grandson's safety revived him enough to snap a token protest at this unwanted solicitude, he let himself be led upstairs with no physical demur.

'End of crisis,' said Uniff cheerfully. 'All's well etcetera.'

The telephone rang again and the bearded man picked it up.

'Hi,' he said. 'Yeah. Look, man, you take that up with the Post Office, OK? No, she's not available right now. I mean, we just had the funeral so she may not want to talk insurance. OK. I'll tell her.'

He replaced the phone.

'Sphincter?' said Bertie.

'That's it. Seems to think we're trying to avoid him. The usual moans. He's a pain. I should have asked if we were insured against Nig's taking off!'

Louisa's sibling solicitude, recently overflowing, was now completely spilt.

'Little bastard,' she said. 'He should have been drowned at birth.'

'That's a bit strong,' protested Tillotson, but she ignored him and followed Uniff out of the room.

Tillotson caught Dalziel's eye and grinned sheepishly.

'Someone ought to tell Pappy,' said Bertie suddenly. He was right, thought Dalziel, but he obviously had no intention of doing anything about it himself.

'Yes, they should,' said Tillotson. 'I'll take the punt.'

He left, whistling cheerfully.

'Go with him,' said Dalziel.

'Do you mean me?' said Bertie incredulously.

'I'm not so old I see bloody spectres,' said Dalziel. 'Who else? You really want a drowning on your hands, then let the lad go punting by himself. Hurry up.'

'Why can't you go?' demanded Bertie.

'I'm older than you,' said Dalziel, patience draining away. 'And I'm colder than you, and I'm wetter than you, and I'm a guest in your fucking house, and I don't care a toss if yon silly bugger ends up in the south Pacific. But he's *your* friend. So get a bloody move on!'

Bertie moved, looking rather dazed. At the door he paused, opened his mouth goldfish-like, but left without speaking.

'You've had practice,' said Mavis admiringly. 'What was it? Army?'

Dalziel had lost sight of her presence and looked at her assessingly, working out if an apology were in order. He decided not.

'Not really,' he said. 'Natural leadership qualities. That one needs a bit of stirring.'

'Mebbe so,' said the girl. 'But don't be too certain about Bertie. Some people develop that kind of complacency as a cover. The world's ruled by calm, smug, self-righteous pigs, and they've all been clever enough to get to the top of the dungheap.'

'Cocks,' said Dalziel.

'Eh?' said the girl warily.

'It's cocks on dunghills, not pigs,' he explained. 'I don't expect there's a lot of nature study in Liverpool.'

'You'd be surprised. Hank's right. You *are* wet. Better get into something dry or you might find yourself spending more time here than you plan.'

'I don't *plan* to spend any time here,' said Dalziel. 'What about you? Just down for the funeral, are you?'

She shook her head, her straight black hair moving with it and stopping when the negative movement stopped. It was heavy and wiry, perfectly natural and with none of the gloss and bounce the TV commercials projected as the most desirable qualities of the female – and male – coiffure.

'No,' she said. 'Business mainly.'

Dalziel sneezed.

'Business,' he echoed invitingly, but all she answered was, 'You're mad to hang around like that.'

'I suppose I am,' he said. 'I'd best go and see if I can borrow any more clothes from the late lamented. Hey, he didn't die of anything catching, I hope?'

'Not unless having a hole drilled through your chest's catching.'

'What?'

'He fell off a ladder in the Banqueting Hall,' said Mavis. 'You've seen the Banqueting Hall, have you? Well, when the builders stopped coming, Conrad decided to have a go at the do-it-yourself. He was up the ladder with an electric drill trying to fix one of the beams. The ladder slipped. Down he came. Unfortunately he fell on to the drill and it was locked on. Straight through his ribs into the heart. Goodbye, Conrad.'

'That's nasty,' commented Dalziel, more because he felt it was expected of him than because he felt any distress. But it was certainly an interesting way to go.

'Was he by himself?'

'Yes.'

'So no one saw it happen?'

'What do you want? Colour pictures?'

'No. I don't think so. Well, I'd best get dried. It's been nice talking to you, Miss Uniff.'

'Mavis will do. It makes me feel younger.'

'You want to feel younger?' he said, surprised.

'Oh yes,' she answered. 'When I see what age does to you, I want to feel as young as I can possibly get, Mr Dalziel.'

'And what does age do to you?'

'It makes you crazy for money, I think,' she said slowly. 'Like, in the end perhaps that's the only way left to keep on pretending you're young.'

'I've stopped pretending,' grinned Dalziel.

'That's what they all think. But you'll see. You're not rich are you, Mr Dalziel?'

'Does it matter?'

'It might do. If you've got money and you stay in this house much longer, you'll be offered a deal. You might not even notice but you will. Go and get dry now.'

Dalziel lay naked in the dead man's bed under half a dozen blankets. After stripping off his wet clothes and towelling himself down till his flabby and fat-corrugated skin glowed, suddenly a warm nap had seemed best of all things.

He had pondered a long time on the events of the day and decided that though there was enough in this household to make him curious, so far it was curiosity at a personal rather than professional level. There must have been an inquest on Fielding and the usual investigations. It wouldn't require much effort on his part to get an unofficial look at the finding. But he had no intention of doing so. Oh no. This was an interesting interlude, a bit damper but probably a bit more lively than following a guide round some mouldy cathedral or making conversation with some poofy hotel barman. But tomorrow he'd be on his way. If they couldn't do anything about his car, then sod it. He'd hire another and collect his own later.

Relaxed by his resolve, he fell asleep.

When he awoke it was quarter to six and he was starving. He rubbed his eyes, yawned, scratched his groin sensuously and headed for the bathroom.

What kind of nosh did they dish up here? he wondered as he pushed open the door. Old Fielding had made some nasty crack about Mrs Greave, the cook. But it'd have to be very bad to blunt Dalziel's appetite tonight.

The bathroom was full of steam. He paused in the doorway. Someone moved among the wraith of vapour and he had no difficulty in recognizing Mrs Fielding though her head was half covered by a towel and the rest of her body was not covered by anything but a healthy post-hot-bath glow.

'Beg pardon,' he said, stepping back and closing the door. But he couldn't close out the mental picture of what he had seen and when he sat down on the bed, he realized he had the beginnings of an erection.

He whistled softly as he considered the phenomenon. He was far from being a sexual obsessive. Indeed, since his wife had left him, his sex life had been minimal. Not that opportunity was short. Like any society dedicated to money and male chauvinism, Yorkshire provided the kinds of relief strong men need from the pressures of the day. But a police officer had to be very careful. It was on the surface a very conventional society and scandals were easily kindled. As for paying for it, Dalziel refused on a point of pride rather than principle.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.