

The Serial Murders

by Kim Newman

"Surely, this is common or garden crime," said Richard Jeperson, knuckle-tapping one-way glass, getting no reaction from the woman in the interrogation room. "The Diogenes Club doesn't do ordinary murders."

"Don't watch ordinary television either, do you?"

Inspector Euan Price had a strong Welsh accent: "you" came out with extra vowels, "yiouew."

"The odd nature documentary on BBC2," he admitted, wondering what the goggle-box had to do with the price of tea in China.

"And Doctor Who, sir," put in Fred Regent, Richard's liaison with Scotland Yard.

"Professional interest," explained Richard. "If you had Daleks, we'd do Daleks. Or Autons. That would be Diogenes Club material. We are the boys—and occasional girl—who cope with the extra-normal. This is so ... so News of the World."

"Jockey Ridden to Death by Top Model," said Vanessa, the "occasional girl" Richard had thought of. "Sport, crime, smut ... just needs a randy vicar to tinkle all the bells."

Richard looked again at the murderess beyond the mirror. She wore jodhpurs and a scarlet huntswoman's jacket. Her hard riding hat was on the table, but her blond hair was still bunned up. He might assume the only creature Della Devyne wanted to see killed had a brushy tail, pointed ears, and a folkloric reputation for cunning. This was not a description of the corpse in the case. Della had calmed down and was waiting patiently for what came next—whether another cup of Ealing Police Station tea or a twenty-five-year stretch in Holloway.

Though the mirroring was on the other side of the glass, Richard saw the tinted ghost of his reflection superimposed over Della. He looked like a crash-dieting Charles II. His moustache alone required more barbering than a glam rock pop star's hair. Today, he wore a tight white-and-pink striped waistcoat over loose scarlet ruffle shirt, black matador britches tucked into oxblood buckle-boots, and a crimson cravat noosed through a scrimshaw ring representing the Worm Orobouros. He did not match the olive-and-tobacco institutional décor.

Keenly attuned to unvoiced feelings, he could sense mental turmoil whenever a policeman saw him. Your basic bluebottle constantly had to fight a primal urge to yell "Get yer hair cut" at him. When a policeman saw Richard Jeperson, it was usually because his particular, peculiar services were urgently needed. A measure of tact—not to say begging and pleading—was required to secure his assistance.

"Which of you is going to tell him?" said Price to Fred and/or Vanessa.

Tact—indeed, begging and pleading - seemed not to be on offer today.

Richard had the unfamiliar impression that everyone else in the room knew more than he did. He was supposed to be the sensitive, who told people things they hadn't picked up on, then basked—just a little—in the glow of admiration.

Fred and Vanessa looked at each other furtively. His sensitivities prickled again. Neither wanted to own up ... but to what? They had alibis, and this wasn't even a whodunit. Price had evidence and a confession. He should be turning Miss Guilty over to briefs, quacks, and the Old Bailey.

"Where have you heard this before?" began Price. "Discovering that her famous, Grand National-winning jockey boyfriend secretly hates horses and takes every chance to maim, injure, or abuse one of the blessed beasts, our lovely lass feels compelled—by a gold-maned nag which speaks to her in dreams—to saddle him up and gallop him around the practice track, with liberal applications of the whip and spurs, until he drops frothing dead?"

"Unique in the annals of crime and lunacy, I'll be bound," said Richard. "But still not a matter for us. Miss Della Devyne ..."

"Née Gladys Gooch," put in Vanessa.

"... the former Miss Gladys Gooch is out of her tree, Inspector. That's why she rode Jamie Hepplethwaites to

death. And don't try to say the dream horse nonsense makes this a paraphenomenon. Pack her off to Broadmoor and get on with your proper mysteries, like the Ministerial Disappearances or the City Throat-Cuttings."

"Unique, you say?"

"In my experience, which—as you know—is extensive, yes."

"It's not unique, though, look you? DS Regent, tell him."

Richard arched an eyebrow at Fred, who looked distinctly sheepish. Vanessa found something absorbing to examine in her paper cup, which couldn't be tea leaves.

"Zarana, my girlfriend," began Fred, "she follows it, and ... you know ... you watch a couple, and you need to keep on watching, just to find out what happens next. It's rubbish, of course. Real rubbish. But ..."

He fell silent, as if he'd just delivered a speech which began, "My name is Frederick and I'm an alcoholic" to a circle of inadequates on primary school chairs.

"Miss Vanessa," prompted Price. "Could you enlighten our Mr. Jeperson?"

Vanessa crushed the cup and dropped it in a bin.

"We're talking about The Northern Barstows, Richard," she said. "A television programme. A soap opera."

"I've never heard of it."

"It's on the channel with adverts."

"Ah." Richard made a point of limiting his select viewing to the BBC. So far as he knew, the channel-changer on the front of his set only went up to "2."

"Richard believes commercial television was invented by Satan," Vanessa explained to Price.

Actually, Richard didn't believe that—he knew it for a fact.

"What about this 'soap opera'?" he asked.

"Last night, on the Barstows," said Vanessa, "'Delia Delyght' killed 'Jockie Giggglewhites' with exactly the same m.o. Whips, spurs, saddle, the lot. I didn't see that coming, and the storyline's been running for months."

Yesterday evening, Vanessa had cried off a visit to a reputedly haunted tube station, disused since the Blitz and blighted by spectral ARP wardens. Her story was that an unexpected aunt was in town and needed looking after. It seemed improbable to Richard that he hadn't sensed the dissembling, but Vanessa was too close. He didn't suspect his associates of leading secret, shameful lives. The "haunting" turned out to be down to rumbling drains and a rack of forgotten gas masks.

"Highest viewing figures since that documentary about the Queen eating cornflakes," said Fred. "Pubs empty when the show is on. People everywhere rabbiting nine to the dozen about Delia and Jockie. And you didn't notice."

"I imagine I was too busy re-reading Proust in the original," said Richard.

"I don't doubt it, guy," said Fred. Richard picked up his glum resentment. Now the secret was out, Fred would be in for some ribbing. Except ribbing usually came from Vanessa's direction, and she evidently shared his shameful addiction.

Richard raised an eyebrow at Price, who was lighting his pipe.

"Oh yes," he said, "me too. Never miss the Barstows. At the Yard, see, the lads have a portable set. If you want to rob the Bank of England, do it on Tuesday or Thursday between eight and eight-thirty. No one will show up to nick you 'til you're well away from Threadneedle Street with the loot and Max Bygraves is on."

"I didn't think it was possible to learn anything new at my age," said Richard, "but you've all surprised me. Congratulations."

Clearly, he was the only one whose brain wasn't fogged with "soap." He needed to deliver an incisive explanation, then go back to Albertine disparue. The rest of the populace could happily gorge their minds on rubbish twice a week without bothering him.

"This woman is another sad addict," he declared, pointing at Della-née-Gladys, "and has become a 'copycat.'"

Struck by the coincidences of names and professions in the fiction, she felt compelled to enact the television story in real life. An argument for severe regulation of such programming, no doubt. The answer to crimes like these is more nature documentaries. But this is a psychological curiosity, not a supernatural event."

"It's not so simple, Jeperson," said Price. "The Northern Barstows guard their future scripts better than MI5 guard our military secrets."

"Lots better," said Vanessa, from bitter experience.

"The point is to be surprising, see. The whole country had to wait to find out what Golden told Delia to do to Jockie. But last night, this woman, Della, did exactly the same thing to the real-life Jamie, at the same time as the programme was going out."

Richard thought about this.

"It's happened before, Jeperson. This case is the Ministerial Disappearances."

"On the Barstows, 'Sir Josiah Shelley' and 'Falmingworth' vanished from a locked cabinet room," said Vanessa. "Just as, in real life, Sir Joseph Keats and his secretary Farringwell disappeared, scuppering passage of the Factories Regulation Bill."

"And the City Throat-Cuttings," said Fred. "Prince Ali Hassan was assaulted by that fanatic on the floor of the stock exchange just when the same thing happened on telly to 'Prince Abu Khazzim.'"

Despite himself, Richard became interested.

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"The horse told me to do it," said Della Devyne.

"In your dreams?" prompted Richard.

"No, that was the horse on the telly. It wasn't exactly like that. Nothing was exactly the same. They changed it just enough to be different. 'Just enough not to be sued,' Jamie always says. Used to say. Oh dear, I'm sorry. That programme used to drive him mad."

"The Northern Barstows?"

Della nodded. She was being cooperative, going over the whole thing with Richard. He'd interviewed murderers before and knew the types. The professionals didn't talk at all, just shut up and took their medicine. The enthusiastic amateurs liked to brag and wanted to see their pictures in the papers. Della fell into a third category, the escapists. Before the big event, they'd been nagged and nagged about something, either by other people (not infrequently their victims-to-be), brute circumstances, or a persuasive inner voice. Ultimately, the only way to make the irritation go away was to reach for a blunt instrument or a bottle of pills. Such cases were as likely to kill themselves as anyone else: self-murder was an escape too.

Della was in a kind of did-I-really-do-that-oh-I-suppose-I-must-have daze. To Richard's certain knowledge, inner voices did occasionally turn out to be external entities, human or otherwise.

"You also watch this television series?"

Della shook her head. "Lately, Jamie stopped me, said it would upset me to see what they'd made us out to be. I always used to follow it though, used to love it, but when they brought in those characters ... 'Jockie' and 'Delia'? Well, anyone could tell they were supposed to be us."

"You think the characters were based on you and Jamie?"

"No doubt, is there? They say 'any resemblance with persons living or dead is unintentional,' but they have to, don't they? By law. Jamie looked into having them up for libel ... or is it slander? Slander's when it's said out loud and libel's written down."

"A tricky point," Richard conceded. "It would be written down in the script but said out loud by the cast. Who to sue, the writer or the actors?"

"It also has to be not true."

Della stopped. She had owned up to killing, but now wanted to hold back.

Richard took her hands and squeezed. He had the sense that in some way this woman was innocent and he needed to help her.

Price's instincts were good. This was a Diogenes Club case.

"Was it true?" he asked gently, fixing his gaze on her.

"You have lovely eyes," she said, which was nice but not really where he wanted this interview to go. He faintly heard Fred stifling laughter beyond the mirror.

"Yes," she went on, "it was all true. So far as I could make out, from what Jamie said and the questions people kept asking me. As I said, I haven't seen the Barstows in three months. With Jamie gone, I suppose I can watch again. That's something. They have telly in prison, now, don't they? Anyway, when Jockie and Delia came on, Jamie shut me out of the front room and watched on his own. He always came out furious. If you ask me, he was angrier after episodes when Jockie and Delia weren't in the story than when they were."

"Did he take any action? Against the programme?"

"He sacked a couple of grooms, some secretaries, and his manager. Swore up and down that someone must be talking. 'Leaking' he called it, like secrets. It was Watergate to him, you see. They were getting inside his circle, ferreting things out, then putting them on telly. One of the grooms was supposed to have sold some of our old clothes to the people who make the show, for the actors to wear. And not just clothes, but other things, personal things. Jamie kept being asked if he hated horses like Jockie. Every time he denied it, it seemed more like the truth. I know it didn't used to be true, but somehow it came true. I don't know how they did it. There were things only he knew about—things I didn't know—which went out on telly."

"For example ...?"

"Do you remember Bright Boy, the horse that threw Jamie at Goodwood, that was kidnapped and never found? On the programme, a horse called 'Lively Lad' injured Jamie ... I mean, Jockie. They showed him beating it to death with a cricket bat, then faking the kidnapping. Jamie would never come out and say so, but I think the telly had it right and his story to the papers was a lie. He showed me the ransom note and the ears and tail the kidnappers were supposed to have posted to him. The police took it seriously. They never caught the crooks, though. Jamie got rid of his golf clubs about the same time. Not in the rubbish—in the furnace. You don't burn your clubs if you give up golf, do you? And he didn't give up. He bought a new set. No, Jamie killed Bright Boy, just like Jockie killed Lively Lad. They knew, those clever telly people, they knew."

"Just like they knew about you? About what you did?"

Della's brow creased. Now she was gripping his hand. He felt strength in her—as well as modelling: she was a show-jumper. She knew how to hold the reins, apply the whip. The spurs were excessive, but they had come from Jamie's private tack room.

"I can remember it," she said. "I remember having the idea. I'm not mad. I know a horse doesn't speak inside my head. I know that I'm the horse, really. It's just ... it really does seem like someone else was there. Someone who's not here any more. Does that make sense?"

"Almost nothing makes sense, Della."

He leaned in close and whispered, so Price couldn't overhear. "Say that Jamie forced you to ride him, begged you not to stop. It was a sexy game that went too far."

"But ..."

"It wasn't exactly like that, I know. But it was something like that, and you should not suffer for this. Understand?"

There was a rattle at the door. Price coming in. Richard let Della's hands go and sat back.

"Inspector Price, how nice to see you? We've got to the bottom of this, I think. Has Miss Devyne been charged?"

Price's face fell. He saw his closed case opening like a parachute.

"The inquest will rule misadventure in embarrassing circumstances. We should let this young lady go. She's had a gruelling experience and needs to be with her friends and family."

Vanessa slipped in, past the Inspector.

"Come along with me, Della," she said. "We'll get you out the back. There are reporters out front."

"No," said Della. "I'd like to see reporters. I have to sometime. And I have something to say they'll want to hear. Before I go, I want to fix my face. May I?" "Of course," purred Richard.

Price glared at him in a you've-created-a-monster manner.

Vanessa led Della away, to be presented to her public.

"She bloody did it, Jeperson," said Price, when Della was out of earshot. "You know she bloody did it!"

"Yes, but she didn't bloody mean it."

"What about the throat-cutter? Do we let him go too? He killed five people to get at the prince."

"Leave him be, for now."

"For now?"

Price would have to do a deal of fancy footwork to explain the handling of this case. In the end, it would be all right. If viewers felt the martyred Delia was more than justified in treating the odious Jockie the way she did, they would feel the same about Della. Besides, The Northern Barstows was officially fiction. If it couldn't be proved that what they showed on television had happened in real life, then Delia was off the hook.

"Look at it this way, Price—what with the TV tie-in, you'd never be able to get an unprejudiced jury. It'd be a show trial, run longer than the series, and we'd all end up looking like right plonkers. This way, she gets her own spin-off, and we can go after the real source of the problem."

"Which is ...?"

"The Northern Barstows. I want to know more about how the programme is made and the people who make it. Don't worry, I've not forgotten your ordinary murder. It's just something extraordinary is mixed in."

Price shrugged. Richard saw through his gloom to dour Celtic triumph. The Inspector had been right to call the Diogenes Club. Now he could let them make the running.

Vanessa returned.

"How did she do?" Fred asked.

"Stunning ... marvellous ... saucy ...," said Vanessa.

"So much for the Grauniad?" said Fred. "What would the News of the Screws say?"

"My Kinky Sex Hell With Jammy Jamie: Top Model Tells All—Exclusive!" She called her agent and had him pass on a message to her lawyer. She knew just how much slap to put on for that tearful yet glamorous look."

"Bless," said Richard.

"Now what, guv?" asked Fred.

"You're going to follow up the police cases. Go over the Disappearances, the Throat-Cuttings, and Hephlethwaites. Plus anything else that turns up—my gut tells me there'll be more. Vanessa, doll yourself down to mere gorgeousness so you can pass for a struggling actress and have Della's agent get you an audition for this Barstows effort. Seems like they could do with a touch of metropolitan glamour. I will get up to speed on this apparently significant cultural phenomenon that has somehow managed to pass me by. It seems likely the programme is at least haunted and at worst cursed, so it behooves someone like us to investigate ... oh, wait a mo, I've just remembered, there isn't anyone like us. We're the only hope for a happy outcome. Any questions?"

Price, Fred, and Vanessa were all about to speak.

"No, I thought not," Richard said hurriedly. "Let's get cracking. Mysteries don't solve themselves, chaps and chapsesse."

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"When I were a lass, Brenda-girl," said Mavis Barstow, ever-accusing finger jabbing at her long-suffering daughter's eye, frosted perm shaking with indignant fury, "times were 'ard ... bloody 'ard."

It was a familiar speech, delivered in an accent thick as a Yorkshire coal seam or a Lancashire piecrust without feeling bound to the specific vocal traits of any geographical county. The Barstows lived in Bleeds, an industrial stain on the misty moors of Northshire, a region impossible to locate on ordnance survey maps. In black and white, Mavis was resplendent in a sparkling jet beaded ensemble over a blinding silver blouse. Her diamonds kept flashing under the studio lights. Richard assumed the idea was a low-budget, North of England Joan Crawford. The frankly frumpy Brenda, victim of many a cutting remark, wore a grey swirly minidress and was self-conscious about her chubby knees.

"We 'ad none o' yer fancy edyecashun," continued Mavis, warming to a favourite subject, 'an' only a tart'd wear a frock like tha,' but we 'ad respect, Brenda-girl ... bloody respect! I'll hear no more o' this tripe an' onions about you gettin' engaged to a sooty, cause ye're no' too grown-up to bare yer rump an' get a stripin' from yer Da's old miner's belt."

"But Mam," whined Brenda, who strangely had a Birmingham accent, "I'm with child!"

Mavis' face set in the gargoyle snarl which always meant someone would suffer serious emotional or physical damage in the next episode. The theme tune cut in, an unacknowledged collaboration between the Brighthouse and Rastrick Brass Band and the Pink Floyd. Credits slid across still photographs of slag-heaps, urchins, and strikers from the 1930s. The Barstows had come a long way since then, though you'd not know it from listening to Mavis the Matriarch.

Richard was once held captive for three weeks by a scorpion cult who were practiced in Black Acupuncture, the science of inflicting non-lethal but excruciating pain by applying venom-tipped needles to the nerve endings. On another occasion, he had found it necessary to crawl through three miles of clogged-up Victorian sewer filth in order to throw off a determined shapeshifter who was on his scent. Not to mention a childhood spell in a German labour camp, traumatic enough to blank out any memory of whoever he had been before Captain Geoffrey Jeperson found him in the ruins of Europe and adopted him. But nothing in his experience was quite as agonising as a fortnight in the basement screening room of Amalgamated Rediffusion Television's West London offices, watching episode after episode of *The Northern Barstows*. He would never hear that infernally memorable theme tune again without wincing.

Lady Damaris Gideon, MP, was on the ART Board of Directors and owed a favour to the Diogenes Club. In 1928, Edwin Winthrop—Richard's predecessor and sometime mentor—supervised a gruesome pest-control exercise at Gideon Towers, ridding caverns underneath the estate of a branch of the family who had practiced obscene rites in the sixteenth century and degenerated into nastily toothy mole-folk. Thirty-five years on, no longer the ingénue who'd required rescuing from her many-times-removed cousins' appalling larder, Lady Dee wore long sleeves to cover bite-marks and tinted contacts to conceal the pink, distinctive Gideon Eye. A tough-minded survivor of far more terrifying battles in business and politics, she was well up on the trouble in Northshire and was only too happy to dump the problem in someone else's lap.

"O'Dell-Squiers have their own fiefdom with that wretched programme," she had said, "and the Board would not be unhappy to see them taken down a peg, just so long as the unwashed keep watching the adverts."

Having now seen their O'D-S logo over two hundred times, Richard knew O'Dell-Squiers made *The Northern Barstows* on behalf of ART, who syndicated it through the Independent Television network. The production company was owned by June O'Dell, the actress who played Mavis Barstow, and her ex-husband, Marcus Squiers, the writer who had "created" the show.

Lady Dee was the only person Richard had run into on this case who wasn't a Northern Barstows fan. In fact, the MP refused even to cast a cold, contemptuous Gideon Eye at anything broadcast by the company which paid her a fat salary plus dividends simply for gracing an annual meeting with her presence and a letterhead with her esteemed name. In what sounded like an uppercrust Mavis Barstow rant, she told him she loathed the wireless ("especially those ghastly transistors"), despised television on principle ("it's for being interviewed on, not watching"), was iffy about talking pictures, and none too sure if music halls should be allowed.

The most useful thing to come out of the meeting was that Lady Dee had put Richard in touch with Professor Barbara Corri, "this batty spinster from one of those plateglass pretend-universities." The professor was infamous for pestering ART with questions about *The Northern Barstows*. The programme was her field of study, and she taught a course around it at the University of Brighton.

"In my salad days at Shrewsbury," said Lady Dee, coming over Mavis again, "it was Greek and Latin, with a bare minimum of Shakespeare to satisfy the 'moderns.' None of this rot you read in the *Sundays* about degrees in plays full of swearing or pop records by the Bootles. But she knows her onions, this Barbara Corri. If you absolutely have to find out about this dreadful thing, she's your best bet. ART could scrape up a

consultancy fee if needs be. We've an interest in settling this curse. Sir Joseph Keats was on the Board too. Is still, if he ever turns up alive."

Among Professor Corri's works was a paper in Television Monograph entitled " 'Women of A Certain Age': The Stereotyping of the Independent, Powerful Woman in British Television Serial Drama: Crossroads, The Northern Barstows, Coronation Street." Richard tracked it down and did his best to understand the argument before phoning her and offering to spring for train tickets and accommodation over an unspecified period if she would pitch in on what he vaguely defined as "a research project." The students were on vac, so she was available and had enthusiastically agreed to meet Richard at the ART offices.

He arrived first and waited in the company's reception area under a bank of photo-portraits of the company's in-favour stars. Pride of place was given to a positively Queen Motherly, four-times-the-size-of-the-rest June O'Dell. A workman was replacing a scowling young man with a grinning, quiffed comedian. Richard considered the discarded picture.

"That's Donald Shale," said a woman who'd come in while he was pondering the brevity of fame in an age of mass communications. "'Jockie Giggglewhites.' Written out and gone from our screens. Typecast as a sadistic shrimp. Not good for long-term career prospects."

Richard turned to meet Professor Corri, then mentally rebuked himself for subscribing to a stereotype of "women of a certain age" just as set in stone as anyone else's in "the dominant culture." Lady Dee called Barbara Corri a "spinster," which might technically be true in that she was past forty and unmarried. It wasn't the label Richard would have applied. He would have inclined to something like "stunner."

The professor's well-fit mustard and cream trouser suit emphasised her womanly shape. A double rope of pearls circled her admirably swanlike neck. Her face was sculptured and cool, with symmetrical smile lines. She raised Queen Bee sunglasses, using them as an aliceband in her upswept auburn hair, and showed amused, sparkling light-hazel eyes. Male students with little interest in "Approaches to British Television Serial Drama" must sign up for her course just to sit at the front and watch her suit stretch tighter as she stood on tiptoes to chalk up a reading list.

"I really must thank you, Mr. Jeperson," she said, shaking his hand with a good grip. She wore violet chamois gloves. "I've been trying to get in here for ages. You obviously know the magic words which open up the vaults."

She offered him her arm, a curiously old-fashioned gesture, and proposed, "Shall we delve?"

Having spent two weeks in a darkened room steeped with Barbara Corri's fragrance, Richard wished the flickering twaddle on the screen hadn't been a distraction. However, without the waft of ylang-ylang and the delicate susurrus of the professor's rapider breath during "high-emotion" moments, he'd have been driven to gnaw off his own arm by June O'Dell's relentlessly strident Mavis, let alone the provincial stooges who came and went as the fortunes of the family rose and fell and rose and fell again.

Bleeds seemed bereft of a middle class. The characters—most related by blood, marriage, or liaison—were either disgustingly rich and vulgar or appallingly poor and noble, sometimes shifting from one end of the socio-economic spectrum to the other within a few episodes. The show featured a strange meld of cartoonish social stratification and fractured time-space continuum. The haves lived in the highly coloured present, where floating walls were adorned with pop-art prints and dolly birds strutted in hot-from-Carnaby-Street fashions. The have-nots were stuck in a black and white Depression of an earlier decade or even—in the cobbles, fog, and gaslight district—a bygone century.

After each episode, the lights came up and Professor Corri added footnotes while the desk-sized videotape player cooled down and an archivist rewound the magnetic tape and stowed the fanbelt-sized spool.

"'Brenda's Black Baby' is the big plotline of 1969 to '70," said the professor. "It divided the country, played out over two whole years. It's something only a soap can do, tackle story in real time. We see Brenda's affair with Kenny Boko, a jazz musician who works in one of Cousin Dodgy Morrie's nightclubs. She has to deal with a voodoo curse placed by Mama Cartouche, Kenny's former girlfriend ..."

For a moment, Richard was interested. Voodoo curses were in his usual line.

"... then Mavis finds out, and is set against the relationship, as in the episode we've just seen. For a short time, Mavis becomes a pin-up for the National Front. They fight a Birmingham by-election using a Mavis quote, 'No Daughter of Mine Would Marry a Bloody Darcy.' Their vote goes up, and for the first time in that constituency they don't lose their deposit. But, over the months, Mavis comes to accept the situation, and delivers Baby Drum herself on Guy Fawkes Night, with fireworks in the background. The 'Birth of Drum'

episode was the first Barstows in colour. Sales of colour sets tripled in the weeks before the event."

"What happened to the baby? He's not in the recent shows we've seen."

"Lost in an Andean plane crash with Brenda, when Karen Finch, the actress, was written out overnight. She had a salary dispute with O'Dell-Squiers and got unceremoniously dumped. Aside from O'Dell, Finch was the longest-lasting member of the original cast. And she doesn't have a piece of the show. Rather a sad story, actually, Finch. Had a breakdown and went around saying she was 'Brenda Barstow,' soliciting donations for a mission to rescue Baby Drum from South American cannibals. There's a cruel instance of intertextuality on Barstows as Mavis is strung along by a con-woman who claims to be Brenda, her face different thanks to plastic surgery, also running a bogus charity scam. Of course, this is where we came in. The vexed relationship between reality and fiction. Romans-à-clef are nothing new in serial drama, back to Dickens and Eugène Sue. People have been bringing suit or making complaint that this or that fictional character is a libellous version of themselves at least since Whistler forced George du Maurier to rewrite Trilby to take out some digs at him. Sometimes, it seems our reality is a disguised version of The Northern Barstows rather than the other way round. The bogus Brenda is arrested and imprisoned before Karen Finch is taken to a secure hospital."

"Just like Delia and Della?"

"That seems to be near-simultaneous, which goes beyond my idea of credible. Still, Marcus Squiers says every time he dreams up a storyline the rest of the writing staff pooh-pooh as beyond belief, he reads in the newspapers that the exact same thing is happening somewhere."

"An assassin in full Omar Sharif gear riding a camel into the stock exchange and slashing about himself with a scimitar?"

"That's one of the more extreme incidents."

"But there are more?"

"Dozens. In the early days, when Barstows is squarely in the British realist tradition, it doesn't happen much or at all. Mavis and the rest are metaphorically, and occasionally literally, incestuous. Storylines concentrate on the family and their dependents. Then Barstow & Company become a power corporation and Mavis goes high society and mixes with government ministers, pop stars, sports celebrities, and gangsters. Slightly disguised caricatures of well-known people are a major ingredient in the formula. Clive James says you're not really famous until you've been misrepresented on The Northern Barstows, but of course they've never done him, so that might be sour grapes. Then, as we know, Bleeds bleeds. Things happen on Barstows which then happen in real life. It's a problem for me. My interest is in soap as representation, but it seems Barstows has stopped representing and started being. I'm not sure what discipline covers the situation now. Yours, probably."

"Mine, definitely."

Barbara Corri had looked him up too and had a fair idea of his discipline. The University of Brighton had its own two-man School of Parapsychology, where student volunteers took carefully measured doses of hallucinogen to open their third eyes and played with Rhine cards or tried to make hamster wheels spin with the power of their minds. She had asked about Richard there, and her colleagues were impressed—not to mention murderously envious as only an underfunded academic could be—that she was being seconded by the legendary Diogenes Club.

"Shall we press on and look at the next episode?"

Two weeks ago, they had started with the original six-part drama from 1964, in which self-made rag trade millionairess Mavis Barstow coped with the sudden loss of her husband ("Da") and recriminations around the funeral led to an irreversible break-up of her extended family. The serial proved so popular that ART commissioned an ongoing series from O'Dell-Squiers, which meant the irreversible break-up turned out to be reversible after all. Richard had sampled episodes from different periods of the show. After looking at the recent storylines which paralleled the Hepplethwaites, Keats, and Hassan cases, they had dipped back into the archive to view representative or significant episodes selected by Professor Corri to give a sense of the "evolving totality of Barstows."

He put his hand on the professor's warm knee and shook his head.

"I think I've seen enough. My eyes have gone square, and I can't get Mavis' voice out of my head when I try to sleep. This phase of the project is concluded."

"Where do you want to go from here, Richard?"

It was the first time she had used his first name. He had an impulse to take things from here in a direction entirely unconnected with the mystery. He recalled his duty and took back his hand, hoping he could sense in the professor a response that should be filed away and dealt with later.

"Barbara," he said, savouring the syllables, "I believe there is only one logical place to go. Bleeds, in Northshire."

Her eyes were startled a moment. Then she smiled, shocked to giggles. "Can I come too?"

"I insist on it."

"What fun. I'm on sabbatical, so I'm yours for as long as you need me."

He could not resist putting his hand back on Barbara's knee.

"Excellent," he said. "I'm sure you'll come in handy. You can be my native guide in the jungles of ... television."

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IV

"Northshire" was confined to Haslemere Studios, deep in the Home Counties. As a boy, Richard had assumed there was a connection between the Home Counties and the BBC's Home Service. The cut-glass accent he had grown up speaking issued from both.

"Semiologically, Surrey is more 'Southern' than Brighton," observed Barbara as they drove past a road sign indicating the turnoff for the studios. "The South Coast is Southerly in a mere geographic sense. Haslemere is what Northerners mean when they talk about 'the South.'"

Professor Corri was from Leicester, originally—which was neither up nor down. Like Richard, she spoke with an accent learned from the wireless and films with Celia Johnson. It struck him that in thirty years' time everyone in the United Kingdom might speak like The Northern Barstows. He felt a chill in his bones.

"To a world of bad faith and inauthenticity," he pronounced.

His gloomy toast sounded odd in the leather-upholstered interior of the Rolls Royce Silver Shark. After all, his own "natural" voice was a legacy of listening to the clipped, posh urgency of Dick Barton Special Agent and Journey Into Space. Still, he dreaded the idea of newsreaders, cabinet ministers, and Harley Street specialists who sounded like Mavis Barstow.

The car slid down a narrow lane, with tall hedgerows to either side, and a tree canopy that gave the road ahead a jungle dappling. He remembered Barbara was supposed to be his "native guide."

They were waved past a barrier by a uniformed guard who didn't check the authorisation Lady Damaris had provided. Anyone in a Rolls was entitled onto the lot. After they had passed, the boom came down on a carpenter's van, and the guard executed a thorough inspection of a load of lumber some production designer was probably fretting about.

A young man with hair past the coat-hanger-shaped collar of his tight-waisted lemon-and-orange shirt was waiting in the car park. He carried a clipboard and a shoulder-slung hold-all that could only be called a handbag.

"Lionel Dilkes," said the professor. "PR. An old enemy."

For an old enemy, Lionel was demonstratively huggy and kissy when Barbara got out of the Silver Shark. He looked at everything sidelong, tilting his head one way or the other and peering through or over aviator shades. Richard estimated that he was envious of Barbara's plunging crepe de chine blouse and pearl choker.

"This is Richard Jeperson," she said.

Lionel tried looking at him with and without the tint and from several angles.

"The Ghost-Hunter?"

"Think of me as a plumber. You have a funny smell coming from somewhere and damp patches all over the living room ceiling. I'm here to find out what the trouble is and put a stop to it."

Lionel shrugged, flouncing his collar-points.

"Make my job easier, luv," he said. "All the rags want to write up is the bloody curse. Can't give away pics of Ben Barstow's new bit on the side. And she's a lovely girl. She'll show her tits. She says she won't now, that she's an 'actress,' but a flash of green and it'll wear off. No worries at all on that score. You'd think she was a natural for the Comet or Knight. But no, all the pissy reptiles care about is the sodding curse. They're all running girlie shots of that horsey cow Della Devyne! All she's ever done is kill someone, and not in an original way. I voted to sue her for plagiarism. It's getting to be a complete embarrassment. And guess who Mavis Upstairs blames?"

Lionel thumbed at his own chest.

"Mavis Upstairs?"

"June O'Dell, luv. Round here, she's Mavis Upstairs. You can't get near her, I should warn you now. She's leading artiste and is always in her own head-space. When she's not on set, she's in her 'trailer'—that's a bloody caravan to you, luv—surrounded by joss sticks, chocolate assortments, and botty totty."

"I will need 'access all areas' if I'm to do any good."

"You can need all you want, sunshine. I'm just telling you Mavis Upstairs isn't covered by the law of the land. She's a National Institution, though some round here who say she ought to be in one. Ooops, pardon, slip of the tongue, naughty me."

Lionel extended a wrist, limp enough to count as a stereotype all of its own, and slapped himself.

"Lionel mustn't let his tongue flap like that. Slappy slap slap!"

Richard raised an eyebrow.

"You'll get used to it, luv," said Lionel. "We're all indiscreet round here. You don't get appointed to a job on The Northern Barstards, you get sentenced to one. No time off for good behaviour, so don't expect to find any."

Lionel turned and walked away. His Day-Glo green velvet trousers were too taut at the hip to allow circulation to the legs but flared so widely at the ankle that he could only progress with a peculiar wading motion.

"Come on," he said, looking back over his shoulder, lowering his shades, "meet the Barstards ..."

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V

Lionel took Richard and Barbara up to what looked like a zeppelin hangar and touched a black plastic lozenge to a pad beside a regular-sized door, which sprung open for thirty seconds to let them in then slammed shut and refastened like an air lock. The PR led them up a rickety staircase to an ill-lit nest of desks and couches, where people were shouting at each other while talking on telephones to (presumably) other people elsewhere.

"Welcome to the Bad Vibes Zone," said Lionel.

"Interesting expression," commented Richard.

"Came up with it on my own, luv. Now, don't take this wrong, but walk this way."

He flounced—deliberately—into a labyrinth of partitions, leading Richard and Barbara along a twisting path, hurrying them past perhaps-interesting individuals in their own cubicles.

"We need more space," admitted Lionel. "ART like to keep O'D-S in a tiny box. Stops us getting to big for our boots. In theory. Guess what? Theory don't work. They don't make boots ginormous enough for how big this lot think they are."

They came to an area where a small, bald, damp-cheeked middle-aged man in a cheesecloth sarong sat cross-legged on a giant mauve cushion with appliqué sunflowers. The Buddha-like figure was surrounded by long-haired youths of both sexes who were waving long strips of yellow paper like Taoist prayers. On the strips were scrawled arcane symbols in biro.

"This is a script conference," whispered Lionel. "Hush hush, genius at work. That's Mucus Squiers. It's his fault."

"For creating the programme?" asked Richard.

"For not throttling Mavis Upstairs in her sleep when he had the chance. They used to be married, though

that's not a picture anyone should have in their head, luv."

Richard looked again at Squiers. The writer-producer would be happier in a bowler hat, collar, and tie, carrying a rolled-up umbrella. The guru look was the only way he could get respect from his staff writers. For a moment, Richard thought the man was holding a blue security blanket—but it was a large handkerchief which he was using to mop his freely perspiring brow.

Two girls with beehive hairdos, whose general look was ten years out of date rather than the normal-round-here five, took shorthand dictation on big pads, like courtroom stenographers. Squiers was assembling a script by taking suggestions from the circle, rejecting a dozen for every one he took. Whenever he let a line or a bit of business through, the originator glowed with momentary pride and the rest of the pack looked at him or her with undisguised hatred even as they agreed that the contribution was a work of genius. The genius in question belonged to Marcus Squiers for making the selection, not to any of the acolytes for chattering forth stream of consciousness material, tossing out notions to burn and die in the sunlight, in the hope that one or two might grow up to be concepts, then get a thick enough carapace to become actual ideas.

"Next, after the ad-break ...?" asked Squiers.

"We've not seen Cousin Dodgy Morrie for two weeks," put in a girl with glasses that covered four-fifths of her face. "His plots are still dangling."

"Uh-uh, Mavis won't have it. She's in a sulk with Morrie since he got that good notice in the Financial Times."

"He could have an 'accident,'" pressed someone, seeing an opportunity.

Squiers shook his head. "We still need CDM. It's poor bloody Sydney who got the review."

"Sydney Liddle plays Cousin Dodgy Morrie," whispered Barbara.

"Could we 'Darrin'?" asked a smart-suited Pakistani man.

Squiers blotted droplets from his temples. "We've used up our 'Darrin' this year, with the Bogus Brenda."

"To 'Darrin' is the practice of replacing an actor in a continuing role with another," said Barbara. "It comes from the American sitcom Bewitched."

"The BB wasn't a full 'Darrin'," said the girl with the glasses. "That was a 'Who.'"

"A 'Who' is a modified 'Darrin,'" said Barbara, "from ..."

"Doctor Who?"

Barbara patted him on the shoulder. "You're learning to speak TV, good. A 'Who' is when you do a 'Darrin' but have an excuse, like the Doctor regenerating from one star to another, or plastic surgery, which is what they did with the Bogus Brenda, who ..."

"... returned, having had the face-change she had previously only claimed to have had, intent on getting revenge on Mavis Barstow for cutting her inside man, Mavis' nephew Ben, out of the family business."

"You're a fan!"

"No, I just paid attention in the last two weeks."

Squiers looked up and fixed them with watery eyes.

"Who are these people, Lionel, and do we pay them to mutter during script time?"

"This is the ... um, plumber."

Lionel made all sorts of eye-rolls and contortions. Squiers squinted blankly.

"He's come about the ... you know ... thing we do not mention ... the c-word?"

The penny dropped. At least with Squiers, who took another look at Richard. The writer-producer was in the loop on the investigation, but the rest of the pack were best kept in the dark. If this was where the ideas came from, this was the likely source of the problem.

"Fair enough," said Squiers. "Sit comfortably at the back and don't speak up unless you've got a better idea than any of these serfs. Which, on their recent record, isn't unlikely."

There were only large scatter-cushions available. Richard settled on one, achieving perfect lotus. Barbara managed sidesaddle. Lionel leant against a wrought-iron lamppost that happened to have sprouted in the

middle of the office, and cocked his hip as if the fleet were in.

"Now, CDM is out until the Moo cools down ..."

Barbara mouthed the words, so Richard could lip-read. "M.U. Mavis Upstairs. The Moo."

"Besides, we've got other patches to water."

"D-Delia D-Delyght is about to go to t-trial," stuttered a fat fellow who wore a school cap with a prefect's tassel.

"Last month's story, Porko," sneered Squiers. "You lose the cap."

He snatched it away.

"B-b-but ...," b-began Porko.

Squiers waved the cap about by its tassel.

"Who wants the thinking cap this week? Come on, you fellows. Pitch in. There's all to play for. Yaroo. What about Ben's new bit?"

"Lovely Legs," said someone, approving.

"That's right. The lovely Lovely Legs. The bogus Brenda, of whom we just spoke, people! More formally, Miss Priscilla Hopkins. Granddaughter of ... come on, anyone, it wasn't that long ago? I know you were all in nappies when the series started. Come on ..."

Blank looks all around.

"Barnaby Hopkins," said Barbara. "Da Barstow's original partner, whom Mavis cheated out of his share of the business."

Squiers nodded approval.

"Thank you, whoever you are. It goes to show we do better with strangers off the street ... I beg your pardon, madam, but I'm making a point ... than with you bright new graduates and ashram drop-outs. With my producer's hat on, I have to wonder why we pay you all so much."

Faces fell in shame.

"Yes, Priscilla Hot-pins," emphasised Squiers, "away being Eliza Doolittled to extreme poshness, not to mention tending and caring for her remarkably glamorous gams, and now back for ... what?"

"Revenge," suggested Glasses Girl, tentative.

"One of your basic plot motors, yes. But what else? Is she cracking a bit? Learning to love the enemy? Has Ben's crooked smile and sans-gorm charm worked a spell on her? Who knows? I don't. But let's get them together a bit more and find out, eh?"

The business of putting a scene together seemed a lot like Cluedo—Colonel Mustard in the Library with the Poison. This was Priscilla in the Barstow Boardroom with the Suspender Belt. About the first thing Richard had noticed about The Northern Barstows was that every other scene involved sex. The writing pack got excited as they frothed up the seduction of Mavis' nephew. With the Bogus Brenda back as a new face, a whole spiral of story possibilities fell into place. It was another Barstows standard procedure: over the years, especially since the Bona Fide Brenda was written out, several other women had been brought in as antagonists for Mavis, built up either as villains or martyrs, and eventually ejected in some cataclysmic plot event, such as the murder which had just removed Delia Delyght from the screen. Richard wondered if these women tended to depart soon after the actresses started to get as much fan mail or column inches as June O'Dell.

He tuned out what was being said and tried to get a feel for the room, for the way the meeting worked. Squiers was in control, but barely. He tossed the prefect's cap to whoever was in favour at the moment, and other rituals established a tribal pecking order, and ways to jostle for position, claim or forfeit advantage, or be expelled from the light. At times, Squiers was like a preacher, at others like an orchestra conductor. The stenos kept taking it down in shorthand, and yellow strips were waved, spindled, or shredded in the writers' fingers.

"The Moo tells Ben that Priscilla is the Bogus Brenda, that she has always known this, that—in fact—she was responsible for getting her out of jail and bringing her to Bleeds with a new face," said Squiers. "Ben stunned, as usual. Close on Junie's Number Two Expression: Smug Triumph. In with the oompah-and-custard

music, and we're done 'til next Tuesday. And God bless us every one. Now scatter and make babies."

He waved, and the writers moved away. Porko's face was wet with tears. Glasses Girl, who had proposed Mavis be behind the Bogus Brenda's return, looked flushed under the prefect's cap, as if experiencing the aftershocks of the best orgasm of her life.

Squiers discarded the now-soaked handkerchief in a receptacle and slumped on his raised couch. Then he noticed Richard and Barbara were still in the circle.

"Not writers, luv," explained Lionel. "They don't vanish when you clap your hands."

Squiers looked at them again, as if this was all new to him. Richard realised the writer-producer's brain had to contain all "the evolving totality" of The Northern Barstows. He was like a medium, a conduit for all the voices of Bleeds. Whatever was going on here was transmitted through the mind of Marcus Squiers. Unlike some people Richard had dealt with, he did not have invisible, evil entities perched on his shoulder. He might well be mad, but it seemed that most folks in his business were.

"Just so long as they don't rattle the Moo cage."

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VI

After lunch—Richard had taken the precaution of bringing a Fortnum's hamper for Barbara and himself, thus avoiding the O'D-S "hostilities" table—Lionel took them onto the studio floor, where the seduction scene discussed at the script meeting was already being rehearsed in front of bulky television cameras. Lionel told them the pages had been typed over the break. If a stenogs couldn't read her own shorthand, she was empowered to make up whatever she thought would fit. It usually wasn't any worse than what came out of the writing pack.

There was quite a bit of excitement at the entrance of Lovely Legs. Stage-hands, camera assistants, makeup people, and cast members not in this scene all crowded around to get a look.

"See," said Lionel. "Star is born."

Lovely Legs wore only a shortie bathrobe and stockings. She did indeed have lovely legs.

"Odd stage name," Lionel admitted. "She's really called Victoria Plant."

The alias had been Fred's idea. Vanessa was a plant, so she might as well be called one.

"That girl knows you," Barbara said to Richard, perceptively. "She looked over here, then away. Really fast."

"What's that, ducks?" asked Lionel.

"Nothing that matters," said Richard. "She's a very pretty girl."

"Just watch what happens when Mavis Upstairs clocks her. She'll be out of that nightie and into floor-length winceyette with mud on her face and her hair in curlers for the next scene. It's always the way. Still, enjoy the view while it lasts, eh?"

Richard had an insight. "You're not even slightly homosexual are you, Lionel?"

"Shush, luv, think of my position if talk like that gets out. For shame. You can't get a job in telly PR unless you're bent as a twelve-bob note. 'sides, I like the frocks."

He pantomimed another wrist slap.

Richard shook his head.

"Look, this really is how I talk, dearie. Can't help that. Blame Round the Horne."

Another victim of the media. When he'd first seen Barbara, Lionel hadn't been envying her blouse but trying to peer down it.

"If you need a proper poof for some reason, apply to Dudley Finn over there, aka Beefy Ben Barstow. Forget all those stories about him in nightclubs with models and pin-up girls. I planted them all personally. When those long legs wrap round his middle, he's not going to enjoy this scene one bit. Dud the Dud and Geordie the Security Guard make a lovely couple. Oh, slap my wrist and call me Mabel, I've done it again. Talking out of school."

Richard had learned a valuable lesson. No one around here was who they pretended to be, and most of them

weren't even the people they seemed to be behind the obvious pretence at being someone else again. The onion layers peeled off, and there were sour little cores in the middle.

As it turned out, watching *The Northern Barstows* be made was even duller than watching it on television. Even the rapid pace of twice-a-week production meant an enormous amount of waiting around for things to happen, while tedious tasks were repeated ad infinitum. Barbara, of course, was rapt—like a historian with a personal time machine rubbernecking at the first read-through of *Hamlet* at the Globe or the huddle of commanders around Alexander as he scratched out battle plans in Assyrian dirt.

He found a quiet space behind some flats—painted backdrops of Bleeds which hung outside windows on several different sets as if every home and workplace in the city had the same view—and let down his guard, extending mental feelers, opening himself to the ebb and flow of immeasurable energies. This could be dangerous, but he had to do a full psychic recce. It wasn't an exact science. The emotional turmoil around regular humans at the studio was complicated enough to blot obvious traces of the supernatural. Many paraphenomena were overspill from ordinary people's heads, anyway. No ghosts, demons, or extradimensional entities were required to whip up a mindstorm of maelstrom proportions. Maybe a little ritual, conscious or unconscious, to unlock the potential, but it could just be a crack in the skull, allowing boiling steam to jet into the aether.

Of course, Haslemere Studios were haunted. If you knew how to look, everywhere was haunted. Richard had already noticed three separate discarnates on the premises. Tattered flags planted long ago, incapable of doing harm in the immediate vicinity, let alone reaching across distances and forcing others to do their bidding. In an arclight pool, he came across a faded wraith who had been a film actress in the 1920s, almost a star when talking pictures came in and her mangle-worzel accent disqualified her from costume siren roles. Pulled from a historical film begun silent but revamped as a talkie, losing the role of Lady Hamilton to a posher actress, she'd drowned herself in the studio tank, waterlogged crinolines floating like a giant lily among miniature vessels ready to refight the Battle of Trafalgar. All this he gathered from letting her flutter against his face, but the only name he could pick up for her was "Emma," and he didn't know if it was hers or Lady Hamilton's.

He tried to ask about the Barstows curse, but Emma was too caught up in her own long-ago troubles to care. Typical suicide. She chattered in his skull, Mummerset still thick enough to render her wailing barely comprehensible. The only spectral revenge Emma might have wreaked would be on Al Jolson—and he had never shot a film at Haslemere. Richard asked if any other presences were here, recent and ambitiously malevolent. It was often a profitable line of questioning, like a copper squeezing underworld informants. No joy. If anything floated around capable of hurt on that scale, Emma would have known at once what he was asking about. Communing with the ghost left his face damp and slightly oily. When he moved on, she scarcely noticed and went back to exaggerated gestures no one else here could see. She wrung her hands like a caricature spook, but he guessed that was just silent-picture acting style.

On set, Vanessa was giving the hot-and-cold treatment to Dudley Finn. It was textbook slap-and-kiss, come-here-but-go-away wrapping-around-the-little-finger business. Richard saw Vanessa was enjoying herself as *Lovely Legs*, not so much the acting but the pretending. As she made faces, she let the whirring wheels show, daring anyone to call her a fake. Barbara was watching critically. Having picked up the connection between Richard and Vanessa, she was looking for more clues. He should let the two clever women know they were on the same side or else they'd waste time suspecting each other.

He looked at the faces watching from darker corners. Squiers stood between the director, Gerard Loss, a toothbrush-moustached military type, and the floor manager, Jeanne Treece, an untidy blond woman with a folder full of script pages and notes. Squiers wore a stained flat cap that failed to match his guru threads. At the script conference, Squiers had several times used the expression "with my producer's hat on," and now—swallowing a bark of laughter—Richard realised there really was such a garment and it served an actual purpose in demarcating his functions on the show.

A great many other people watched, most with reasons to be there, none with a mark of Cain obvious on their foreheads. Richard picked up many emotions, all within the usual range. Jealousy from Geordie the Security Guard as "Ben" clinched with "Lovely Legs." Boredom from seen-it-all grips and minders. Frustration from a cameraman with ambitions to art, shackled to an outdated camera with three lenses that could be revolved with all the ease and grace of rusty nineteenth century agricultural equipment. Severe cramps from Jeanne Treece. Concern from a wardrobe assistant who knew there was only one dupe of Vanessa's top and that if what she was wearing got torn in the tussle, she'd have to match the rip on the back-up. Quite a few people in the room idly thought of killing quite a few of the rest, but that too wasn't exactly unusual.

So, how did the Barstows reach out and possess people?

It was possible that someone here at the studio was a human lens, a focus for energies summoned in script conferences and unleashed during production, who could channel malignancies into the actual broadcast. A talent like that might slip by without disturbing a ghost, like a light which isn't switched on—but would flare as bright as a studio filament when in use, probably burning out quickly. Raw psychic ability, perhaps not even recognised by its possessor, amplified and sent out to every switched-on television set in the land. Even if people weren't dying, Richard would have been troubled by the concept. If there was a person behind this, they needed to be shut down. Richard dreaded to consider what might happen if the advertising industry discovered this possible psychic anomaly and tried to replicate the process of affecting reality via cathode rays.

There was a slap, a rip, and a clinch. Richard felt the wardrobe assistant's inner groan and the security guard's spasm of hate.

There was no shortage of suspects.

"That's a wrap for the day," said Loss, though not before getting a nod of the producer's hat from Squiers. "The talent are released. The rest of you strike the boardroom and throw up ..." (Squiers whispered in the director's ear) "... Mavis' lounge for tomorrow."

Squiers clapped, and the orders were followed. Television was not a director's medium.

Vanessa threw Richard a look, then slipped out with the other dismissed persons. Her co-star had a quiet, hissy row with Geordie. Lionel shrugged and angled his head, tossing off a "told-you-so" flounce, sneaking a gander under his shades at Vanessa's departing legs. Richard was amused but not yet ready to write off the PR as comedy relief. In this soap, anyone could be anything. No rule said killers couldn't be amusing.

He stood by Barbara.

"Is it all you expected? Or are you faintly disappointed?"

She smiled. "You're sharp, but try not to be too clever. I'm interested in The Northern Barstows and what it means, in why it's popular, why so many people find it important. Whether it's, in objective terms, 'any good' is beside the point."

"So these people aren't the new Dickens or Shakespeare."

"No, though Dickens and Shakespeare might have been the old 'these people.' Come back in a century and we'll decide whether the Marcus Squiers method counts as art or not."

"Method?"

"Crowd control is a method, Richard."

"Is he in control?"

"Not completely. He knows that, you can tell. June O'Dell—who, you'll note, hasn't been around all day—has more say, if only negatively, in what goes out on the show. In the end, the audience has the conductor's baton. If they switch off a storyline, it gets dropped. If they tune in, it's extended. This is all about showing people what they want to see and telling them what they want to hear."

"Wonderful. Fifteen million suspects."

Barbara laughed, pretty lines taut around her mouth and eyes. "If it were an easy puzzle, it wouldn't be a Diogenes Club case."

"You pick up a lot."

"So do you. Tell me, is this place really haunted?"

"Of course. Want to meet a ghost?"

She laughed again, then realised he meant it.

"There's a ghost?"

"Several."

He led her to Emma's arc-light patch. The lamp was off, but she was still tethered to her spot.

"I don't see anything."

"I'm not surprised. Hold out your hand."

He took her wrist, easing back filigree bracelets and her sleeve, enjoying the warmth of her skin, and puppeteered her arm. She stretched her fingers, which slid into the ghost's wet dress.

"Feel that?" he asked.

"Cold ... damp?"

She took her hand back, shivering, somewhere between fear and delight.

"A frisson. I've always wondered what that meant. It really was a frisson. Tell me, what should I see?"

"You don't have to see anything. I can't see anything, though I have an image in my mind."

"Like a recording?"

Richard realised Emma was in black and white. She had been around before films were in colour.

"That's one type of ghost," he said. "Empty, but going through the motions. A record stuck in a groove. This is a presence, with the trace of a personality. Very faint. She probably won't last much longer."

"Then where will she go?"

"Good question. Search me for an answer though. We have to let some Eternal Mysteries stand."

"You know more than you're letting on."

He really didn't want to answer that. But he had reasons other than shutting off this line of questioning for kissing Barbara Corri.

She had reasons for kissing him back, but he didn't feel the need to pry.

"You two, watch out, or the fire marshal will bung a bucket of sand over you," shrilled Lionel. "Come away and exeunt studio left. Pardon me for mentioning it, but you're an unprofessional pair of ghost-hunters. It's a wonder you can find so much as a tipsy pixie the way you carry on."

Richard and Barbara held hands, fingers winding together.

The studio was dark now, floor treacherous with cables and layers of sticky tape. Lionel led them toward the open door to the car park.

As they stepped outside, Richard felt a crackle nearby, like a lightning strike. He flinched, and Barbara felt his involuntary clutch. She squeezed his hand and touched his lapel.

"Nothing serious," he said.

She lifted aside his hair and whispered "You are such a poor liar" into his ear.

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VII

They had two rooms at a guest house near the studio. As it happens, they only had use for one room.

Richard decided the unnecessary expense wouldn't trouble the accountants of the Diogenes Club. After an "It's not just the precious metal, it's the workmanship" argument over a bill for silver bullets, his chits tended to get rubber-stamped without query.

He let Barbara sleep on, priming a little at her early morning smile, and went down for his full English. Framed pictures of supporting players who'd stayed here while making forgotten films were stuck up on the dining-room wall. The landlady fussed a little but lost interest when he told her he wasn't an actor.

The third pot of tea was on the table and he was well into toast and jam when Fred arrived. He had come down from London on his old Norton and wore a leather jacket over his Fred Perry. The landlady frowned at his heavy boots but became more indulgent when Richard introduced him as a stuntman who had worked on *Where Eagles Dare*. More toast arrived.

Fred had new information. He was fairly hopping with it.

"Guv, this is so far off your beat that it has got to be a false trail," he said, "but I've tripped over it more times than is likely, and in so many places I'd usually rule out coincidence."

Barbara appeared, light blue chiffon scarf matching her top, tiny row of sequin buttons down the side of her navy skirt. Her hair was up again, fashioned into the shape of a seashell. She joined them at the breakfast table.

Fred, quietly impressed, waited for an introduction.

"This is Professor Corri, Fred. Barbara, this is Fred Regent. He's a policeman, but don't hold it against him. Continue with your input, Fred. We keep no secrets from the professor."

Fred hesitated. Barbara signalled for the "continental breakfast": grapefruit juice, croissants, black coffee.

"I'm all ears," she announced, nipping at a croissant with white, even, freshly brushed teeth whose imprint Richard suspected was still apparent on his shoulder. "Input away."

Fred cleared his throat with tea and talked.

"I've been calling in favours on the force and the crook grapevine, asking about as requested. I started with Jamie the Jockey, since he's our most recent case. Then I looked into Sir Joseph and Prince Ali. Plus a few we didn't think about, Queenie Tolliver and Buck D. Garrison."

Richard furrowed his brow.

"Queenie Tolliver ran nightclubs in Manchester," put in Barbara.

"That's one way of putting it," said Fred.

"Very well. She was, what would you call her, a gang boss? The Godmother, the press said in her obits. Choked on a fishbone at her sixtieth birthday party. Just when ..."

"I can guess," said Richard. "The same thing happened on The Northern Barstows to a character based on her."

"Lady Gulliver,' Cousin Dodgy Morrie's backer and Mavis Barstow's deadly enemy last year," said Barbara. "Garrison I've never heard of. But there was a Texas tycoon called 'Chuck J. Gatling' on the Barstows. Drowned in a grain elevator just after he tried to buy up a controlling interest in Barstow and Company."

Fred flipped his notebook. "I was iffy about listing Garrison as a curse victim. He died just like Gatling, but on his own spread in Texas. He'd never visited Britain. He'd probably never heard there was a character like him on some English TV show. But he's where I first tripped over the Thing."

"The Thing?" prompted Richard

"The Strange Thing. Actually, the Non-Strange Thing. Professor, we don't do regular police work. We look for the unbelievable. What happened to Buck D. is all too believable. He annoyed some business rivals, and the FBI say he was hit."

"Hit? I really must frown upon this Yankee slang, Frederick."

"Sorry, guv. You know what I mean. Hit. Assassinated. Killed. By a professional. High-priced, smooth, hard to catch. In, out, and dead."

"He was rubbed out by a torpedo?" blurted Barbara. "Don't look so aghast, Richard. I teach a course on Hollywood Gangster Cinema."

Richard shrugged.

"I like her," said Fred. "Can we keep her?"

"Entirely her decision," said Richard. "After much more of this, she may not want to keep us."

Barbara sipped coffee, enigmatic but adorable.

"I put Garrison to one side and came back at the others. The Thing is ... whisper has it that they were hit too."

This was not what Richard expected.

"Jamie Hepplethwaites was in hot water with almost everyone he ever met," said Fred. "He was under investigation for race fixing, and rumour was that he was on the point of telling all. Which would have been inconvenient for certain followers of the turf. The sort of enthusiasts who'd have no scruple about laying out cold cash to put Jamie in a morgue drawer."

"Della Devyne is not a 'tarpaulin,'" said Richard.

"A torpedo, guv. No, I'm not saying she is. I'm just saying some big crims are puffing cigars and bragging that they did for Jamie. Ditto Prince Ali, Queenie, and Sir Joe. The prince can't talk any more with his vocal cords slashed, which is dead convenient for his uncle the king, who was not a big fan of Ali's international playboy

act. Queenie's Mancunian empire is being carved up by her old competition, which mostly consists of her daughters."

"How Lear."

"Manchester CID say they hope the war of succession thins out the herd a bit. Unofficially."

"What about Keats? He's the only one of the victims who had any prior connection with the people who make the show. He was on the board of Amalgamated Rediffusion."

"The more that comes up, the more the show looks like a complete blind alley. It's not just Sir Joe who went missing but his secretary. Between them, they had ten months' worth of work on the Factories Regulation Bill in their heads which is all out the window and back to the drawing board now. That means very happy proprietors of Unregulated Factories. Guess what's being said about them?"

"That they paid to get the job done?"

Fred snapped his fingers. "Got it in one."

Richard whistled and sat back to think.

"I reckon it's a smokescreen," said Fred. "Our Mystery Murder-to-Order Limited is twisting the Barstows to put a spin on their business, keeping the fuzz off their case while advertising a service to potential clients. Jobs like Prince Ali, Queenie, and Sir Joe do not come cheap. This is not an envelope full of fivers to a couple of washed-up boxers to do over a builder who put the bathroom taps in the wrong way. This is serious money for a serious business."

Richard waved his friend quiet.

"It won't do," he said. "It's still too ... weird."

"You don't want to let it go, guv. But if it's just killers with a gimmick, then this goes back to Inspector Price. We're surplus to requirements."

"I mean weird in the strictest sense, Fred. Not merely bizarre and freakish, but occult—concealed and supernatural. I'm tingling with an awareness of it."

"Don't you reckon the professor might have something to do with that?"

"Cheek," said Barbara, smiling and sloshing Fred with a napkin.

"Very well," said Richard. "Fred, hie thee back to town and share this with Euan Price. Start the Yard moving on this from the other end. Go after the putative clients of your phantom assassination bureau. See if the urge to boast about getting away with it leads to indiscretion."

"What about you two? You'll continue the canoodling holiday?"

"We'll stay here, with the Barstows. There's something or someone we've not seen yet. Some big piece which will fill in the jigsaw."

Richard's tea was cold.

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VIII

June O'Dell knew how to make an entrance.

The company made an early start. Dudley Finn was pressed up against a wallpapered backdrop by a single camera. He held a phone to his ear, though the dangling cord didn't attach to anything. Jeanne Treece hoisted a large sheet of card ("an idiot board") on which one side of a phone conversation was written in magic marker. Ben Barstow was getting news about Delia Delyght.

"We're tying off plot ends," Lionel whispered to Richard as Finn took one of many breaks—the actor wasn't as good at reading off the card as he had been yesterday at instantly memorising his lines. "Viewers have written in asking what happened after the murder, so Mucus whipped up this bit overnight to reveal all. It's how this show always goes. Big build-up, over months and months, nation on the edges of their three-piece suites, a shattering sensational climax Õ then we drop the whole thing and move on. Once your plot is over, there's no hanging around. No trial scene with an expensive courtroom set and guest actors in those ducky wigs, no twelve extras on the jury. Just one side of a call. 'So, she's copped an insanity plea, eh ... fancy that ... well, never mind ... you're telling me she's going to be locked up in a loony bin for t' rest of her natural life?"

Fancy that. We'll remember Delia Delyght for a long time in Bleeds.' Like fork, we will. That's all over, and we're onto something else. Makes your head spin."

Finally, Finn got the speech down. As Lionel indicated, the actor had to repeat what had supposedly been said to him by the non-person on the line, with interjected expressions of astonishment.

"It's the famous Phantom Phoner," said Barbara.

Richard knew the show had a habit of cutting into the middle of telephone conversations, without identifying the unseen party, to get over plot developments while avoiding potentially costly scenes ("Morrie's Boom-Boom Room Hot Spot has burned down to t' ground? In a mysterious fire t' police say might well be arson? Eeh, I'm right astonished!") or to repeat the last week's bombshell for viewers who might have missed an episode ("Brenda's up t' duff? By that coloured bloke who plays t' drums? Well, I'll be blowed!"). At the end of the call, Finn had to hang the phone up out of frame. Since there was no cradle for the receiver, a stagehand stood by with a weird little gadget that made the click sound (and was surely more expensive and harder to come by than an actual phone).

Gerard Loss insisted Finn hasten over pauses where, logically, the Phantom Phoner should be speaking. Finn had an actory spat about believability but was reminded which show this was and agreed just to read the board. His last line, crammed close to the bottom of the card, was a cipher scrawl, "t'll be H to P w/ M h a't t—BH!" Richard was worried that he knew instantly what that was about. Every Phantom Phoner scene in the episodes he had watched concluded with Ben Barstow looking straight into the camera, shaking his head and musing, "There'll be hell to pay when Mavis hears about this! Bloody hell!"

Loss called for quiet. Finn took a deep breath and began.

Three sentences in, the big studio door slid noisily open, admitting blinding light and a cloud of Lalique.

Outside the stage building was a red box which lit up the word "Recording." June O'Dell must have waited for it to go on before commanding her entourage to open the door and make way for the Queen of Northshire.

Finn grimly carried on with the "take." Loss chewed his moustache. Jeanne Treece hit herself over the head with the idiot board.

Marcus Squiers hopped to and danced attendance on his ex-wife. He had to negotiate a way past two tall young men who flanked the star. They had mullet haircuts, sideburns like the cheek-pieces of Roman helmets, and had overdone their daily splash of Früt aftershave. Their knitted rainbow tank-tops showed off muscular arms.

In person, June O'Dell was tiny—though enormous hair took her height a little over five feet. She had hard, sharp, glittering eyes, and her skin was shinily tight across the cheekbones and under her chin. Richard had heard her described as "a cross between Miss Piggy and Charles Manson," but she was more frail than he expected. The Tank-Top Twins might well be there to rush in and prop her up if a stiff wind blew.

Ignored by everyone, including a dead camera, Dudley Finn finished his scene. Without the board, he was word-perfect.

"There'll be hell to pay when Mavis hears about this," he said flatly. "Bloody hell."

Jeanne Treece whipped the crew into shifting the cameras to the lounge set and getting it lit properly.

"Madame Moo is prepared to work today," said Lionel. "Lesser mortis have to strike while the icon is hot."

"What about the Phantom Phoner?" asked Barbara.

Lionel shrugged. "Scene's scrubberood. Not that many people wrote in. Delia Delyght is in TV limbo now. Make up your own ending, luv."

"Delia escapes from Broadmoor and comes back chained to an axe-murderer? Then they chop up as many Barstows as they can get to?"

"Pitch it to Mucus, luv. In a year or two, he'll do it. Folk are always coming back to Northshire to get their own back. I shouldn't be surprised if British Rail do a Revenge Special Awayday fare to Bleeds."

One of the Twins handed Squiers a thin script, heavily scrawled on in what looked like pink neon. June pointed a long fingernail at a particular passage and tapped the paper.

"I see the star writes her own lines?" observed Richard.

"Never touches 'em. The pack know how to write Mavis the way Junie likes her. No, she always scribbles

over everyone else's sides. Loves to give the supporting artistes a hard time. She'd force them to run their lines backwards and on their heads if she could. Eventually she will. Knows all the tricks, that one. How to cut the heart out of someone else's scene. How to take it all away with a single nasty look. What to wear to blind the other actors. Of course, Mavis on the show is an evil domineering cow, so Junie's approach might be method acting."

Squiers looked over June's suggested changes, agreeing with every one out of his mouth, appalled fury spitting out of his eyes.

Loss had to chivvy Finn onto the lounge set while jamming June's line changes into him. The actor didn't complain. Squiers, who literally took off his producer's hat when talking with June, diplomatically made a few suggestions.

The lights came up on Mavis Barstow's Lounge, the most-used Barstows set. Its two walls had shaggy purple paper that matched the carpet. At least once an episode, the camera would overshoot while panning to follow the action and afford glimpses of studio blackness and the odd crew member where the other walls ought to be. Inflatable plastic chairs leaked slowly around a glass-and-chrome coffee table loaded with mocked-up fictional glossy magazines. A drinks trolley held rattling bottles of cold tea and dyed water. On The Northern Barstows, no actual products were shown (that was saved for the commercial breaks); everyone drank "Funzino," "Bopsi-Coolah" and "Griddles Ale." Mavis' mother's old mangle stood in a corner like an industrial art piece, to remind her where she came from: she would often tell relatives at length about the way her Mam flattened her hands in a washing accident that threw the whole family into the poorhouse when she were a lass.

An idealised portrait of the very late Da Barstow, in Day-Glo on velvet, cap on his head and miner's pick over his shoulder, had pride of place above a shaped fibreglass marble mantelpiece where his ashes supposedly sat in a silver urn to which many of Mavis' most vehement or nostalgic speeches were addressed. The cremains had once been "kidnapped" by Cousin Dodgy Morrie and held to ransom. Since their return, Mavis often got close to the polished urn to talk to the departed, usually after one too many Funzinos, and the camera had to focus on her distorted, wobbly reflection as she reminisced about how much happier everyone was when they were dirt poor. Jeanne Treece stalked the set, putting odd little folded cards like place-markers in ashtrays, on the magazines, hanging out of Finn's blazer pocket, around the mantel, and under light fittings.

When the floor manager had finished distributing the cards, she gave Dudley Finn a once-over as if checking for dandruff and nodded to Squiers, who signalled to Loss, who made a gun gesture at the Twins, who lifted June O'Dell up by her arms as if she were part of their circus acrobatic act. The actress was propped on two eight-inch blocks with wheels. One Twin steadied her while the other knelt and fixed clamps from the blocks to her calves.

"The Mavis Glide," exclaimed Barbara. "That's how she does it. Platform roller skates."

While her undercarriage was checked and fiddled with, a makeup girl made last-minute adjustments to June's white mask. Then her pit crew stood back. Suddenly, with a girlish giggle, she set off at a wheeled stride and did a figure eight around the set, skirts billowing. Applause was mandatory, but Richard conceded that it was a good act. She lifted one heavy skate off the floor and rolled on elegantly, leg out like a ballerina, then twirled and came to a dead stop.

She was next to Dudley Finn. Thanks to the platforms, June O'Dell was now taller than him.

"If a word of the risers leaks out, you'll be killed," Lionel told them. "No question about it."

The recording light went on again, and June and Finn—Mavis and Ben—went through a scene which had evolved from yesterday's script meeting. June floated about the set as she spoke, picking up phrases or single-word cues from the tiny cards Jeanne Treece had distributed, skating through speeches with the aid of these prompts. The scene built up to the revelation that Mavis knew all along that Priscilla was the Bogus Brenda returned. Richard accepted the sad inevitability that he was now a follower of The Northern Barstows like everybody else in the country. He knew who all these people were and how they related to each other, and suffered a nagging itchy need to know what they would get up to next. This must be what it was like to be a newly body-snatched vegetable duplicate and click in sync with the collective consciousness of the pod people.

"She's an old ghost, Ben," said June, in a line Richard hadn't heard yesterday. "There've bin too many bloody old ghosts round hereabouts lately. Spectre horses, headless spooks, all manner o' witchcraft and bogeyness. I'm beginning to think this family's bloody haunted. An' somethin' should be done about it or my

name's not Mavis Barstow."

Ben weakly put in a line about what was to be done.

"Get me a bloody ghost-hunter," said Mavis. "Someone to put a stop to t' haunting. Or else someone t' haunting will put a stop to."

June's face froze. Richard had assumed the effect was a camera trick, but she really did just stop still and stare at the lens for long seconds.

Loss called "cut" and June was applauded again.

"What was that about?" Barbara asked Richard. "The ghost-hunter bit?"

"I wouldn't say it came out of nowhere," he replied. "I'm rather afraid we've been noticed."

June, who had perspired through her pancake, was wheeled off the set by the Tank-Top Twins and repaired by the makeup girl, who applied what looked like Number Two gloss from a bucket with a brush. Then June was trundled toward Richard and Barbara, with Squiers hopping along in her wake. From her artificial height, June O'Dell looked Richard in the eye.

"So, you've come about the mystery?"

Her natural voice would have suited her to play Lady Bracknell if she could ever be persuaded to admit she was old enough. It was nasal, aristocratic, reedy with that Anglo-Irish affectation known as "West Brit." Richard wondered if she had ever met Lady Damaris Gideon. If so, Lady Dee would probably have come second in a peering-down-the-nose-with-disdain contest. Richard had previously reckoned the MP a likely British champion in the event.

"The haunting?" he prompted. "Very topical."

June tittered, a tiny hand over her mouth. She fluttered long, feathery eyelashes.

"Must remain abreast of current events. It's part of the format. Keeps us all on our toes. Or, in my case, wheels."

"Am I to have a writer tagging along as I work? Taking notes on my ghost-hunting activities."

"Not one of our writers, I trust. You wouldn't want any of those oiks about. I don't understand why we have to have them. Some of us are quite capable of making it up as we go along."

"June has the utmost respect for our writing staff," put in Squiers. "She is being amusing. The poltergeist plot has been thoroughly worked out by trained professionals."

June flicked a glance at her ex-husband, and he withered. Then she noticed Barbara.

"Professor Corri, how nice to see you again. Peachy."

Barbara had not mentioned that she'd met June O'Dell. She nodded in acknowledgement of peachiness but did not attempt a curtsy.

"This curse has become infinitely tiresome and makes our blessed calling far more difficult than it need be. We have a duty to our viewers. They depend on us to take them out of their drab, wretched lives for two brief half-hours a week. Half-hours of entertainment, of education, of magic. It's a terrible responsibility. Many say that the Northern Barstows are more real to them than their wives, husbands, and children. And for some who live alone, the elderly and the loveless, we are the only family they have. It's for them that we do this, undertake the endless struggle of the business we call show. I trust you will bring your investigation to a swift and happy conclusion. Rid us of all ghosts, ghoulies, and ghastriness. You are, I understand, supported by taxpayers' money."

"To an extent."

"Excellent. You are accountable, then. You will come to me tomorrow at tea-time and give a report of your progress."

Richard kissed June's hand. "Of course."

"Alone," she said, eyes swivelling to Barbara.

He felt again the crackle he had experienced yesterday. This was a very powerful woman, perhaps a conduit for a higher, greedier power. He tried to let June's hand go, but she pinched his fingers for a moment, hanging on, then released him when she decided to.

"Now, I must rest. It's fearfully exhausting, you know. Being Mavis."

June pushed off and skated away, independent of the Twins, making Squiers cringe. She did a circuit of the studio, whooshing through the shadowed areas away from the brightly lit lounge.

Richard watched her brush past Emma's cold, damp spot.

There was a sound in his head like a bubble being popped and June sped back, puffed out a little like a cat with a mouthful of feathers. She zoomed across the set toward the door, which the Twins got open in time, and whizzed out onto the car park.

Richard walked toward Emma's spot.

"What happened?" Barbara asked.

Richard opened himself up, trying to find yesterday's presence. Emma was gone, completely. Her psychic substance had been consumed.

"That woman's a sponge," he told Barbara. "She just ate a ghost."

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IX

The Daily Comet, Britain's best-selling tabloid, led with the headline "TERROR STALKS BARSTOWS"—bumping England's failure to qualify for the World Cup and another oil crisis to the inside pages. The popular press had been filling their middles with trivial showbiz stories since the days of Marie Lloyd sitting among the cabbages and peas and Lillie Langtry snaring the Prince of Wales, but now ephemera like this made Page One. Richard sensed another trend in the making, another step downstairs. From now on, Coronation Street would get more newspaper coverage than coronations, Harold Steptoe would be more newsworthy than Harold Wilson, and the doings of Barstow and Company would be followed more intently than those of Barclay's Bank. Eventually, there would only be television. More and more of it, expanding to fill the unused spaces in the general consciousness.

The Barstows weren't taping this afternoon, so before-cameras talent had time off. Squiers and the writing pack were conjuring up the next script. June was in her caravan with a nervous ghostwriter, one of a string employed on her much-delayed autobiography; it seems she ate them up, just as she consumed real ghosts. Finn, suitably equipped with a dolly bird as "arm ornament," was opening a supermarket in Bradford; "Victoria Plant" had turned down an offer of £15 to play the lucky girl, diminishing her chances of getting ahead in the business. Lionel was working on a futile press release to deny all these silly curse rumours.

Richard and Barbara met Vanessa in the Grand Old Duke of North.

Vanessa was perched on a barstool not designed with modern female fashions in mind. Unless she fixed her tangerine-and-lemon minidress firmly over her hips, it rode up and turned into a vest. She looked down, with an unjustly critical eye, at her officially lovely legs.

Richard sipped Earl Grey from one of the silver thermos cups in today's Fortnum's hamper and took a psychic temperature reading. Vanessa and Barbara had hit it off at once, which was a positive. Otherwise, the Grand Old Duke was a chill place.

The pub, another Barstows standing set, was in the studio's smallest stage. Here, many a "pint of Griddles" had been called for and swallowed by a Barstow who needed a drink before spitting out the latest news, usually some bombshell lobbed just before the adverts to keep viewers transfixed as they were mind-controlled to hire-purchase fridge-freezers, terrorised by the catastrophe of hard-to-shift understains, warned of things their best friends wouldn't tell them, and urged to buy the world a Coke. Here Ben Barstow had enjoyed (or perhaps not) a liaison with Blodwyn, the Welsh barmaid who broke up his third marriage and then died in a plane crash two episodes before his fourth wedding. Here, for weeks and weeks, Da's kidnapped urn had been hidden in plain sight, in the display case along with clog-dancing, whippet-racing, and brass-band trophies. There had been a nationwide contest to "spot the ashes," with viewers writing in to suggest where they might be and newspapers running stories about urns seen in surprising real-life locales from the Crown Jewel case in the Tower of London to an Olde Junke Shoppe in Margate. Some even sent in ashes of their own, in homemade or shop-bought urns: most were just from the grates of open fires, but some contained authentic human bone fragments. It was no wonder the show wound up cursed.

"I think the culprit is the Phantom Phoner," said Vanessa, breaking into his prophetic gloom.

"You think there's a culprit?" asked Barbara.

Vanessa deferred to Richard.

"Sometimes, a curse—by which I mean an infestation of malign extranormal phenomena—is like weather or a bad cold. No one's fault, but hard to do anything about except wait for it to blow over. This happens in more cases than you hear of. Sometimes, it really is a ghost or a spirit—a discarnate, spiteful entity, making mischief or bearing a grudge, acting on its own accord or directed by a houngan who has summoned or tapped into a power and is using it for his or her own ends."

"A houngan?" quizzed Barbara.

"Voodoo sorcerer," shuddered Vanessa. "Like Mama Cartouche, remember?"

"It doesn't have to be voodoo," said Richard. "That's an Afro-Caribbean tradition. Europe has more than enough witchery to go round. Australasia and the Americas too. Everywhere except Antarctica, and that's only because the Sphinx of the Ice won't allow it. In this case, however, I think we are dealing with something vaguely voodoo."

"So there is a culprit?"

"I definitely suspect a suspect," said Richard. "Someone is deliberately shaping events, channelling a force, and, as it happens, charging money for it. What we have here is a hit man, as Fred suggested, but one with an unusual m.o. Working with The Northern Barstows, through the psychic energy generated by the machinery of the show, and directing it, essentially, to kill people. To order, for cash. So, yes, there's a culprit. One who either needs or wants money for their services. In my experience, that tends to rule out ghosts and demons. Some miserly spirits cling to the idea of worldly goods even when they're beyond a plane in which they'd be any good to them. You've heard of the ghost who collects bright trinkets—coins and jewels—like a magpie. A nuisance, but not serious, especially since you usually get the pleasant surprise of finding the hoard of goodies at the end of the day. This isn't like that. This is large sums transferred to Swiss bank accounts. This is organised crime."

Barbara, intent on what he was saying, put down her salmon sandwich.

"But how is it done? How can something that happens on a television programme, which boils down to actors pretending, lead to something happening to real people out there in the real world? When Delia rode Jockie to death, what happened to make Della do the same thing to Jamie? Or am I getting the order wrong?"

"I have ideas about that. Vanessa, what was the most significant thing Della told us about the case?"

Vanessa shrugged.

"Think 'Penny for the Guy.'"

"Old clothes," said Vanessa, tumbling to it at once. "We were told that Jamie fired a groom who was supposed to have stolen some of their clothes. Jamie thought the actors' costumes included items filched from him and Della."

"And not just clothes, but other things, personal things."

Vanessa snapped her fingers. "It's pins! Pins in dolls!"

Barbara shook her head. She hadn't caught up.

"What do you think the personal things were?" Vanessa asked. "We can find out from Della, but what do you think ..."

"Anything really. Combs, with hair. Makeup. Cigarette-ends. Rings. Things impregnated with sweat, skin, hair. Clothes should do it alone, but the rest would put the pink bow on it."

"Voodoo dolls," said Barbara, catching on. "On the Barstows, Mama Cartouche made a doll of Brenda, with nail-clippings and hair pressed in, and stuck pins through it. Brenda had twinges."

"Probably where our culprit got the idea," said Richard.

"You have to admit this is a new one," said Vanessa. "Fashioning characters on a television programme into voodoo dolls, then torturing or killing them in front of fifteen million people ..."

"... some of whom believe in the characters. June said the Barstows were more real to viewers than their own families. All that belief has to mean something, has to do something, has to go somewhere!"

"God, there's a paper in this," said Barbara.

Richard and Vanessa looked at her.

"But there is," she said. "This is what I've been saying all along. TV soaps matter. They shape reality. I'm not saying it's a good thing, I'm saying it's a thing thing."

Richard slipped an arm around the professor and kissed her ear.

"Hold off on publication for a while, Barbara. Let's at least nab the killer first."

"I have a name," said Fred.

They looked at the stage door. Fred had come in, motorcycle helmet under his arm. Richard knew he had heard enough to be up to speed.

"I went after the gambling syndicate, the ones who hired Jamie's murder," said Fred. "Price hauled in some minor faces, put the squeeze on ... and someone coughed up a name. Our hit man."

Fred let the pause run.

"Do tell," prompted Richard.

"Stop faffing about, Regent," said Vanessa. "This isn't the end of an episode and we can pick up on Thursday."

"Darius," said Fred. "That's the name he uses. 'Darius Barstow.'"

Richard was sure he had turned to where the camera would be and frozen his face long enough for the credits to start rolling.

He shivered as he heard the Barstows theme in his head.

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X

Head of Wardrobe at O'Dell-Squiers was Madame Louise Šsperance d'Ailly-Guin ("Mama-Lou"), a tall, slender woman, graphite-black, with large, lively eyes and a bewitching islands accent. Her office ensemble ran to a red mushroom-shaped turban, white silk strapless evening dress with artfully ragged hems, and matching PVC go-go boots. Behind her desk was an altar to Erzulie Freda and a framed snapshot of a young Mama-Lou frozen in the middle of a snake-waving dance under a Haitian waterfall.

Richard, inclined by instinct to look gift horses in the mouth, felt the same way about a gift houngan.

Tara, the wardrobe assistant Richard had seen on set, was showing Mama-Lou a range of designs for Priscilla's future dresses. Mama-Lou pencilled crosses on the rejects, flicking away hours of work.

Richard did not insist on being attended to. It was more useful to observe.

Last night, in the TV room at the guest house, Richard had for the first time watched The Northern Barstows as it went out to the nation, even though there was an interesting-sounding programme about cane toads on BBC2. Barbara, Vanessa, and Fred helped him through it. He turned the sound down during the adverts and covered the screen with a sheet of grease-proof paper to shield his senses from mind-altering subliminals in the baked-bean-and-gravy commercials. It was the episode he had followed from script to shooting, so there shouldn't have been surprises. Vanessa thought they hadn't used her best "takes" and detected the hand of June O'Dell in the editing suite. A few interesting bits and pieces were slipped in that hadn't come up at the script meeting, which must have been shot when he wasn't looking—a shadow stalking through the fogs of Bleeds, hobnail boots clumping on the cobbles; a mysterious wind blowing through the Grand Old Duke, giving Bev, the new barmaid, horrors; objects wobbling slowly (on visible strings) around the boardroom, indicating a poltergeist problem. The curse was being worked into the show, which set up Mavis' speech about calling a ghost-hunter.

"In trut,' nix to ahll these," Mama-Lou said to Tara, returning the last design.

The girl was exasperated, dreading the work of going back to the beginning.

"They won' be needed," said the Head of Wardrobe. "Word come from on high."

Mama-Lou thumbed upward, at the ceiling. The Wardrobe Department was a windowless bunker beneath the writers' den. Multiples of costumes hung in cellophane shrouds, continuity notes pinned to them, indicating when they had last been worn on air. Shoes, hats, coats, gloves, scarfs, and belts had their own racks. Principle characters had niches, where their two or three outfits were looked after. There was a separate

room, temperature-controlled and with a combination lock, for June O'Dell's wardrobe, which was twice the size of the rest of the cast's put together.

"We can't keep Lovely Legs in that fruit-punch frock," said Tara. "It goes fuzzy in transmission and looks like she's wearing a swarm of bees. Technical have sent several memos about it. Sound on vision. And the poor cow at least needs a new pair of tights."

Mama-Lou drew a finger across her throat.

Tara was sobered. Mama-Lou put the finger up to her mouth.

"Hush-hush, chile," she said. "Don't nobody know outside of you, me, and the loas."

Mama-Lou's eyes flashed at Richard.

Whatever it was nobody knew, he didn't know it either. Unless he did.

"Now, run off and see to Dudley's latest split trews, while I converse wit' this gentlemahn."

Tara's head bobbed and she withdrew.

"Now, Mist' Jeperson ..."

"Richard."

"Reechar."

Mama-Lou reached out and touched his chest, appreciatively feeling the nap of his velvet collar.

"I like a mahn who knows how to dress."

She left his jacket alone.

"Now, what can I do for you?"

"I'm interested in how you costume some of your characters. You can guess the ones I mean."

"Jockie and Della. Prince Abu. Sir Josiah and Falmingworth. Lady Gulliver. Masterman and Dr. Laurinz. Mr. Gatling. Pieter Bierack."

She had obviously been waiting for someone to ask.

"You have a few more on your list than I do."

"I've been workin' here long-time, Reechar. I'm firs' to know who's comin' and who's goin.' When word comes down from on high, I have to dress the word, send it out decent to the studio floor. You dig?"

"I think so."

"A costume is more than jus' clothes. It's the t'ings in the pockets, the pins under the lapels, the dirt in the soles of the shoes, weathering and aging ..."

She led him to the "Ben" rack, raised cellophane from a jacket, showed the fray of the sleeve-cuffs, a loose button, a stitched-over stab-mark. From the pocket, like a stage magician, she pulled out a stream of items: a bus ticket, a paper bag of lemon-drops, an item of female underwear, a tied fishing-fly in the form of a water boatman.

She smiled, showing sharp, very white teeth.

He laughed as she flourished an artificial flower.

"I'm not so interested in Ben Barstow," said Richard.

"Wouldn't surprise me if he be interested in you," said Mama-Lou.

Richard wondered if he was exuding psychic pheromones. Since he and Barbara had happened, people treated him differently. Mama-Lou was closer to him than decorum would advise. And she was right—Dudley Finn had been giving him glances. And so had June O'Dell.

"Very flattering," he said, "but not the field I wish to explore. Where are the racks for Jockie and Della?"

Mama-Lou made a fist, then opened it suddenly.

"Gone. To the 'cinerator. No room roun' here. New come, so old gotta go. Policy directive."

She looked to the ceiling.

"And all the others. Gone too?"

She made an up-in-smoke gesture.

"I'd have been interested to know how you costumed them?"

"Carefully," she said. "We go to great lengths to procure the ... suitable items, to give them the proper ... treatment."

"You don't make the costumes yourselves? You buy them in."

"Some t'ings we run up here. Got an award for it. Mavis Barstow wears only original Mama-Lou designs. She insists. Not'ing June O'Dell puts on has been roun' a human body before. Some of the other women's t'ings we do the same. Had a Carnaby Street designer under contract for this new girl's clothes. He'll be gone, now. Change of policy. For the ones you'll be interested in, we procure. We copy sometimes, but we make the copy good. You understand what I'm tellin'?"

"Indeed."

"Good. You put a stop to it?"

She stood back and folded her arms. He didn't try to pretend he didn't know what she meant.

"I'll certainly try."

Mama-Lou nodded, once. "Good. A sacrilege is no good to anyone. If a blessing is put to an evil end, evil comes to everyone, even the mos' blessed. Maybe the idea comes from my island, but none of the conjuring comes from me. Dig?"

"Dug."

"I follow Erzulie Freda, loa of love. This be the path of the Saturday Man. Know him?"

"Baron Samedi?"

"Hush-hush, Reechar," she said, laying a finger on his lips. "Say not his name, lest he come to your house. Caution agains' the Saturday Man. And come this way."

With beckoning finger, Mama-Lou lured him deeper into the bunker, past more and more racks. Finally, she came to two new racks, which held only hangers and cellophane. No clothes yet.

"I said I know firs' when new people come. They get a rack, even before the role is cast. These are the ghost-hunters' racks."

Character names were stuck to the racks. An invisible fist thumped against Richard's chest.

ROGET MASTERMAN. DR. CANBERRA LAURINZ.

"Sound familiar?" asked Mama-Lou.

While Richard was calming, Mama-Lou placed something soft on his head. She looked at him sideways.

"Not your style, but you'll need it."

He took off the headwear and looked at it. It was an old flat cap.

Mama-Lou stroked his coat again, more wistful than flirtatious.

"Now you go think what has to be done. Then come back to Mama-Lou, give blessings to Erzulie Freda, and we make a conjuring. Dig?"

"The most."

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XI

"Did Mama-Lou dispense any useful wisdom?" Vanessa asked him.

"Yes, dear. You're being written out."

She swore, elegantly. "You got this from the wardrobe mistress?"

"No more dresses for Lovely Legs, ergo ... no more Lovely Legs."

Richard was holding council of war in the boarding-house sitting room. Fred had used his best "intimidating

skinhead" glower to scare off a commercial traveller who had been settling down to ogle Vanessa and Barbara through slits cut in the Evening Mail. Now, they had privacy.

"Have they tumbled that she's a plant?" asked Fred.

Richard wondered about that.

"I think not," he concluded. "They want shot of Lovely Legs to make room for new developments."

"The poltergeist plot?" prompted Barbara, who had sat in with the writing pack all day. "It's come out of nowhere and isn't really the Barstows style. No matter how unlikely things have got before, with plastic surgery or unknown twins coming back from Australia, they've stayed within the bounds of possibility. No ghosts or UFOs."

Realising the others were giving her hard looks, Barbara wondered what she had said wrong, then caught up with herself.

"Sorry," she said. "It's not easy to get used to. This is new ground for me. Of course, there are ghosts and UFOs. That's what you're here for."

"No UFOs," said Fred. "That's rubbish. There aren't any little green men from outer space."

"Yet," said Richard.

"There are ghosts," said Vanessa. "And other things."

"Vampires?"

"Yes," said Richard and Vanessa.

"Werewolves?"

"More than you'd think," said Richard. "And all manner of shapeshifters. There are were-amoebae, which need to be strictly regulated."

"Possession, like in *The Exorcist*?"

"God, yes," shuddered Vanessa. "Not a favourite."

Barbara shook her head and sighed.

"Welcome to the club, Prof," said Fred. "I know how you feel. This isn't natural for me either."

"The poltergeist plot?" prompted Richard.

"Yes, that," said Barbara, drawn back to her original thought train. "For most normal people, which—strangely—includes the O'Dell-Squiers writing staff, there's a line between barely plausible and outright unbelievable. With the Bleeds Bogey—that's what they're calling the poltergeist—the line has been crossed. At today's conference, the girl with the big glasses was summarily sacked for questioning whether the programme should go down that street."

Richard wasn't surprised by that. It suggested their quarry knew how close they were to catching up.

"The rest of the pack are frothing," continued Barbara. "It's Hallowe'en come early. With his producer's hat on, Marcus Squiers wants to retain you as technical advisor."

"That means they'll make up what they want anyway but pay you to put your name in the end credits," said Fred.

"My understanding is that they want to give me more than a name-check. Barbara, did Squiers mention the ghost-hunters who're showing up on the programme?"

"There's a buzz about them, though the pack got secretive when the subject came up. They suddenly remembered I was in the circle."

"The character names have been decided," Richard told them. "I've seen their racks in Wardrobe. Masterman and Dr. Laurinz. Roget Masterman and Dr. Canberra Laurinz."

"Canberra!" blurted Barbara, appalled. "I must say, this crosses the line. I'm supposed to engage critically with the subject, not be swallowed by it."

Richard had a pang about involving an outside party in the investigation. It did not do to get civilians turned into frogs.

"Who's playing you, guv?"

"I assume someone called Peter Wyngarde has been approached," said Richard. "The supposed resemblance keeps being mentioned."

Vanessa looked at him, thought about it, then ventured, "I wonder how Peter Cushing would look in a multi-coloured Nehru jacket and moon boots?"

"It'll be someone from provincial rep or Früt adverts," said Fred. "No one you've ever heard of gets on the Barstows. No offence, 'Ness."

"None taken. It's true. The Moo is Reigning Star and doesn't like pretenders to the throne. 'Victoria Plant' found that out in about two minutes."

"In some instances, they cast for physical likeness, not talent," said Richard. "They'll be poring over Spotlight for lookalikes. A wig and a 'tache will do for me, but I imagine Barbara will be harder to match."

"Don't you believe it," said Professor Corri, trying not to be frightened. "I'm always being mistaken for some woman who wears fangs in Hammer Films."

"Will you get script approval?" asked Fred. "They could make you look a proper nana if they wanted. Like they did Jamie Hepplethwaites. We work in the shadows, guv. If you get famous for being lampooned on telly, the Ruling Cabal will Not Be Best Pleased."

"That had occurred to me."

Richard reached across the sofa and held Barbara's hand. She returned his grip firmly.

"Something occurs to me," said Vanessa. "You should be careful about giving away old clothes to War on Want."

"A little late for that," Richard admitted.

They all looked at him.

"Today, while we were out, our rooms here were broken into. Not so you'd notice, but I take precautions and I can tell."

"Don't tell me, your closets are empty?"

"No, Fred, they're full. Exactly as they were this morning."

"I don't get it."

"Barbara and I have brand new clothes. The same styles as the old ones, but different. I'm not sure, technically, what crime has been committed."

"They can't think you wouldn't notice," said Fred.

"The new outfits have been aged to match the old. By Tara, the wardrobe assistant, if the faint trace of Coty's Imprevu I whiffed around the counterfeit of my Emelio Pucci shirt is a significant clue. I understand Tara's specialty is scrounging up dupes for established costumes. Mama-Lou will not be pleased by the girl's involvement."

"They're after you, guv. You and the prof."

"Yes, Fred. They are."

"Barstards!"

The landlady came in, like a hurry-the-plot-along bit player, and told Vanessa she had a call.

"The Phantom Phoner," she said and left the room.

Richard pulled Barbara toward him. The professor was not used to being in supernatural crosshairs, and her mind was racing to keep up. A few weeks ago, she hadn't even known there were such things as curses, and now she was at the sharp end of one.

"I should have specialised in nineteenth century woman novelists," she said. "My post-graduate thesis was on George Eliot. But the field was so crowded. The bloody structuralists were moving in, throwing their weight about. No one was thinking hard about television. So, here I am ... I suppose I brought this on myself. You might have mentioned this was dangerous, though. If I'd stayed on campus, the worst that could happen was ... well, getting burned at the stake during the next student demo ... but being cursed is fairly bloody drastic."

Vanessa came back.

"That was my agent," she said. "The one Della set us up with. Your scoop was on the money. Priscilla of the Lovely Legs is off to Nepal to find her missing father in a lamasery. She's left a note for Ben, which will make matters worse. I don't even get an exit scene. My pay packet is waiting at the studio, and I can swap my entry lozenge for it any time in the next two days. My digs are no longer being paid for by O'Dell-Squiers. She tells me, if it's any consolation, that 'Victoria Plant' has had a ton of fan mail, plus a film offer."

"Exciting?" asked Fred.

"Not really. Sexploits of a Suburban Housewife. More in your lady friend's line than mine."

Zarana, Fred's girlfriend, was an "exotic dancer" who cheerfully admitted to being a stripper and did occasional modelling and actress jobs. She had been gruesomely murdered in several movies.

Vanessa looked glum at the sudden end of her brief television career.

"Knock knock?" said Fred.

"Who's there?" asked Barbara, trying to cheer up.

"Victoria ..."

"Victoria who?"

Fred spread his hands. "That's showbiz!"

Vanessa laughed but chucked a newspaper at him too. Which made him concentrate on business again.

"If the assistant's working against us, is this wardrobe woman behind the scam?" he asked. "The voodoo princess?"

"No," said Richard, "Mama-Lou is sympathetic to our cause. She knows or at least suspects what's going on and sees it as a transgression of her religion. She gave me a hat."

Fred whistled.

"Not a very nice hat," Richard admitted. "But a significant hat. We've seen its like about the place."

He pulled the flat cap out of his pocket and set it on his head.

"Ey oop, there's trooble at t'mill," said Fred, in a Londoner's impression of a Northshire accent. "What do you look like?"

"Anyone?" asked Richard.

"You've got a producer's hat on," said Barbara. "Now I remember where Squiers got it. There's one exactly like it on the set. It's been on a hook since the programme started. Mavis left it there where her husband hung it just before his fatal stroke."

"Da Barstow," said Fred. "Our hit man."

"Da Barstow used to be married to Mavis," said Richard.

"And Marcus Squiers used to be married to June," said Vanessa. "He's put himself right in the frame."

"Literally," said Richard, taking off the cap. "Da's wearing this in his portrait."

"So this little bald git is diabolical mastermind of the month?" said Fred, who only knew Squiers from press cuttings. "Can't say I'm surprised. He's a dead ringer for Donald Pleasence."

"Is that a dupe?" asked Vanessa.

Richard looked at the stained lining-band. He had noticed how much Squiers sweated. He fingered the cap.

"It may be a dupe of the cap on the set, but it's the original 'producer's hat.' I imagine Mama-Lou's slipped Squiers another dupe, which he's been wearing without noticing. Are you following this, Frederick?"

"The Barstards have got your clothes and you've got his cap."

"Very good, Fred."

"But what help is that to us?" asked Barbara.

"Level playing field, Prof," said Fred.

"Two can do voodoo," said Vanessa.

"Ah," said Barbara, catching up.

Richard was thrilled. He recognised this was the most dangerous phase of the case. When he became excited by the problem and had a solution in mind, he was tempted to be let down his guard and take silly risks. With a volunteer along for the ride, he needed to remember that when black magic got out of hand, people tended to get horribly hurt.

"I will not let you be harmed," he told Barbara.

She smiled, showing grit. He was pleased with her.

"We'll need to call in favours," he told them, "and work fast. Squiers is ahead on points and is setting us up for a knockout before the end of the round."

Fred shivered. "It gives me chills when you talk like Frank Bough. It only happens when we're on a sticky wicket, up against the ropes, down to the last man, and facing a penalty in injury time."

"How many episodes does a hit take?" asked Vanessa.

"I defer to Barbara's expertise," said Richard.

"Typically," she began, "it's been done over six to ten weeks, twelve to twenty shows. To get the audience involved, I suspect. You said emotional investment in the characters was a key ingredient. I imagine it's important to get all fifteen million viewers on the hook. Of course, Squiers can usually afford to take the time to build slowly, work the relevant plot into the other things going on. None of the earlier, ah, commissions have taken over the programme completely. There've always been other stories running, about Mavis, Ben, and the rest. Now, since we're close to exposing him, there's urgency. The ghost-hunters—us!—were set up on last night's episode and will be introduced at the end of next Tuesday's show. They're due to turn up for the cliffhanger, as all hell breaks loose in the lounge. In the programme, by the way, the Bleeds Bogey is Da Barstow's angry ghost. He reckons Mavis killed him all those years ago. I estimate next Thursday's Barstows will be the crucial episode, when 'Roget' and 'Canberra' are established as characters ..."

"That's when the voodoo is done," said Richard. "When our 'dolls' are fixed in the public mind."

Barbara shivered. "The way things are going," she said, "I suspect we'll be horribly killed the week after. Does that sound right?"

"Just about," said Richard.

"They really are Barstards," spat Barbara. Good. She had progressed from fear to anger.

"We've a week and a half to defy the Saturday Man," said Richard. "A challenge. I enjoy a challenge."

"And I enjoy breathing," said Barbara, "so rise to it, Richard."

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XII

First thing Monday morning, after a weekend spent mostly on the phone, Richard and Barbara turned up at Haslemere Studios to meet their newly costumed doppelgangers outside the soundstage. Lionel had arranged for publicity photographs. Marcus Squiers, wearing what he fondly thought was his producer's hat, beetled around sweatily in the background, presumably to keep an eye on the doll-making spell.

Actors named Leslie Veneer and Gaye Brough were freshly cast as "Roget Masterman" and "Canberra Laurinz." Veneer had not been in any films or done any television Richard had ever heard of. Having all but given up on acting in favour of work as an insurance adjuster, he no longer had an agent. His head-shot was still in Spotlight just so he could say he was an actor rather than an insurance man when talking to girls at keys-in-a-bowl parties. Gaye's curriculum vitae was more impressive, listing page after page of seemingly everything made in the United Kingdom from A Man for All Seasons to Devil Bride of Dracula—though she admitted you'd need to run prints frame by frame through a Steenbeck to catch her face. In twenty-five years in the profession, Gaye Brough had never played a part with a character name. Essentially, she was an extra. He assumed both players had been cast purely for physical resemblance, which was considerable. When they were posed, Barbara instinctively cosied up to Veneer, and Richard had to reclaim her—prompting blushes, which Gaye instantly matched.

Veneer, obviously shrieking inside with ambitious glee, projected an exaggerated disdain that would come across on screen as woodenness. Gaye bubbled delight and enthusiasm and kept bumping into things—either because the sudden career jump undid her spatial sense or she usually wore thick glasses that were left at home so she could dazzle with her Barbara-like eyes.

The quartet of interchangeables posed together. Veneer and Gaye wore Richard and Barbara's original clothes. Richard and Barbara made do with Tara's dupes.

"With my producer's hat on, I have to say these are perfect."

Squiers looked from the originals to the copies, meek but smug. From him, Richard sensed a species of hurt resentment that his racket had been tumbled, but also a belief that Marcus Squiers was the aggrieved and persecuted party, that he had every right to call on the Saturday Man for aid against those who would thwart his killing business. This was interesting, but beside the point—Richard was curious about the conjurer's motives but knew they weren't important. Squiers thought he was home safe and the interlopers doomed. He was arrogant enough to play the I-know-you-know-that-I-know-you-know game and loiter to enjoy the show as his enemies were supposedly drawn deeper into his trap. Richard hoped that was a mistake.

Richard pinched his wrist and saw Veneer rub what he thought was a gnat-bite.

The writing pack had also turned out and were circling, admiring the casting. As several photographers took thousands of exposures, writers tossed questions at Richard and Barbara, which often bounced off onto Veneer and Gaye, who were bewildered but kept up the mysterioso brooding and glossy smiling that were their single-note performances.

"Richard, do you get enough exercise?"

"Barbara, what crept into the crypt and crapped?"

"Richard, have you ever laid a ghost?"

"Barbara, what's the best recipe for ectoplasm omelette?"

Mama-Lou watched from a distance. Richard caught her eye, and she winked. Blessings of Erzulie Freda. That was a comfort.

After an age, it was over. Lionel shoed away the photographers, and Veneer and Gaye were ushered off to the Make-Up Department.

"They have to get head-casts made," said Lionel.

That was a significant clue as to what Squiers had in mind for Roget and Canberra. A brace of severed heads should be ready for the episode to be broadcast tomorrow week.

Richard's neck itched. It was the wrong collar.

The props department were calling in axes from the warehouse, to give Gerard Loss a selection to choose from.

Next, Richard had an important interview. In June O'Dell's trailer.

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XIII

Tuesday's episode climaxed with the Bleeds Bogey manifesting a full-on telekinetic storm in Mavis Barstow's lounge. Objects were hurled through the air on dozens of fishing lines, and Ben sank to his knees pleading for mercy as invisible forces lashed his face.

For a brief shot that took longer to set up than the rest of the episode, Dudley Finn had makeup scars applied, with flesh-coloured sticking plasters fixed over them—when the plasters were torn away by fishing lines, Ben had claw marks on his face. Then, as Mavis shouted defiance at her late husband, the doors were torn off their hinges, a flood of dry-ice fog-smoke-mist-ectoplasm poured onto the set and cleared to show Leslie Veneer and Gaye Brough posed in the doorway as if hoping for a spin-off series. Loss needed a dozen takes before he was browbeaten by Marcus Squiers—with his producer's hat on, tapping his watch as the shoot edged ever-nearer the dreaded and never-embraced "Golden Time" when union rules insisted the crew's wages tripled—into accepting Veneer's reading of Roget Masterman's introductory line, "Avaunt, Spirit of Evil ... We've come about your bogeys, Mrs Barstow, and not a moment too soon!"

Having been on set during the taping, and even smarmily consulted on the finer points of psychokinesis by an unctuous Squiers, Richard felt he could skip the transmission. His associates were back at the guest house, watching the programme for him.

Inspector Price had said it would be easy to break into the Bank of England while *The Northern Barstows* was on the air. It was certainly easy to slip into the studio where the show was made. Almost everyone connected with the programme was at home in front of the telly, fuming about the way June O'Dell stepped on their lines or taking notes for the 7:00 A.M. post-mortem in the writers' pit the next morning.

Wearing Marcus Squiers' producer's hat and a long, drab coat, Richard felt like a walking manifestation of the *Bleeds Bogey*. He stalked through the car park and approached the stage door, which should have been accidentally left unlocked. No lozenge-filching had been required.

When the door gave at his push, he was relieved. Mama-Lou was off her fence. The revelation about Tara, who was after the top job in *Wardrobe*, fully committed the woman to their cause.

She was a believer, not a priestess—but belief was what this was all about.

Barbara reported that the writers had been forthcoming in discussing Thursday's episode, asking her parapsychology questions she had to invent answers for, but reticent when it came to next Tuesday's, confirming to Richard's satisfaction that Roget and Canberra were due for the chop then. Leslie Veneer, who now had an agent again, and Gaye Brough, who was hoping for the cover of the *TV Times*, didn't yet know how short-lived their stardom was due to be.

So, it all came down to next Tuesday's episode—which had already been written, in semi-secret, by Marcus Squiers, independent of the pack. Barbara had asked around tactfully and discovered this was standard procedure for shows with major plot developments—and also, obviously, when Squiers was using his video voodoo to kill people. The floor taping was due on Friday, with special effects pick-up shots (decapitations?) scheduled for Monday morning.

That gave Richard a weekend to counter the spell. He trusted making television was as easy as it looked. After a few days hanging round the production team, he thought he could wear all their hats. But he still needed help from inside the enemy camp.

It was dark on the stage. His night senses took moments to adjust.

Someone clapped and lights came up.

He was in the middle of Mavis Barstow's lounge. Prop objects were strewn everywhere, tossed by the *Bogey*. Cards stuck to them warned against violating continuity by moving anything.

"Mama-Lou," he called out.

His voice came back to him.

He sensed something wrong. Other people were here, whom he had not expected, who weren't part of his deal.

Strong hands gripped his arms. Two sets.

He bent over and threw one of the men over his shoulder with an aikido move, then sank a nasty knee into the other's goolies. Thanks to Bruce Lee and David Carradine, everyone accepted what British schoolboys used to call "dirty fighting" as an ancient, noble, and religious art form. Richard realised he had just floored the *Tank-Top Twins*. They rolled and fell and groaned and hopped, but had enough presence of mind—or fear of the consequences—not to disturb any labelled props. They got over their initial hurt and came at him more seriously. Richard brought up his fists and thought through six ways of semi-permanently disabling two larger, younger, stupider opponents within the next minute and a half.

"Leave them alone," said a woman. "They're expensive."

The instruction was for him, but it made the *Twins* stand down and back away. Richard opened his fists and made a monster-clutch gesture while doing a ghost-moan. They flinched.

"Was that necessary?" he asked the woman.

"Now I know you can take care of yourself," said the woman. "Good."

June O'Dell, Mavis Barstow, stood on the set as if it were really her home. In slippers, she barely came up to the mantelpiece, but still seemed to fill any spare space. Richard fancied she looked younger tonight, with a little colour in her cheeks that might come from digesting Emma. Ghost-eaters could do that, often without

even knowing how they retained their youthful blush. She wore a filmy muu-muu with mandarin sleeves, diamonds at her ears and around her throat. Mama-Lou was with June, wearing a white bikini bottom augmented by a mass of necklaces, armlets, anklets, bracelets, and a three-pointed tiara surmounted with the skulls of a shrew, a crow, and a pike. Maybe she was more than just a believer.

The Twins faded into the shadows.

"I've been thinking about what you suggested to me the other day about Marcus' sideline, Mr. Jeperson," said June. "It was hard to believe."

"Was?"

"It answers so many questions. I knew Marcus was up to something sneaky. I just didn't imagine it could be so unusual. Such a betrayal of the sacred trust between creative artist and the audience."

"It's dangerous to use the Saturday Man," said Mama-Lou. "Betimes, the Saturday Man wind up usin' you."

"Don't make excuses for the wretched clot, Louise. He was always a worm!"

Richard took off the cap Mama-Lou had given him.

"Ugh. Ghastly thing," said June.

Mama-Lou took the cap back reverentially. It had to become a sacred object.

Richard went to the mantelpiece. All the framed photographs and trinkets had been distributed across the set by the poltergeist, save for Da Barstow's urn—which issued green smoke when it became obvious who the Bogey was. The eyes of the portrait had burned like hot coals. Richard saw where red bulbs had been set into the picture.

He took the urn and twisted off the top.

Screwed up inside were dozens of used cue cards.

"Marcus' words," said June. "This is where he gets to choke on them."

The Twins came back, stepping cautiously. They had fetched a rusty barbeque from the props vault. It usually sat on the obviously indoor set of Ben Barstow's back garden.

Richard lifted the grille and poured the cue cards into the pan.

"You bring what I tol' you," Mama-Lou said to June.

June snapped her fingers and a Twin handed over a brown paper bag.

Mama-Lou looked inside and smiled.

She emptied the bag onto the crumpled cards. Nail-clippings, a still-damp handkerchief, bristles shaved off a toothbrush, blood-dotted Kleenex.

"Obviously, you can't get hair from a bald man," said June. "But Marcus never learned to shave. I think his mummy did it until he married me, and he expected I would take over. No wonder it didn't last. Blood is better than hair, you said?"

"Blood is good, Miss June," said Mama-Lou.

"Will you do the honours, Mama-Lou?" said Richard, bowing.

"Indeed I will. This is my religion, an' I despise what's been done wit' it."

She had a box of Swan Vesta matches caught between her thigh and the tie of her bikini-bottom. She took the box and rattled the matches.

"Erzulie Freda, we call you to the flame," she said, looking up.

Mama-Lou was dancing to unheard music. Her necklaces—which were strung with beads, feathers, items of power, bones, and tiny carvings—rattled and bounced against her dark, lithe torso.

The set lights went down—it wasn't magic: one of the Twins was at the dimmer switch. June snapped her fingers, banishing her familiars—who had orders to stand guard outside. In the darkness, Mama-Lou struck a match. The single flame grew, swelling around the matchhead, burning down the matchstick, almost to her enamelled nails. She dropped the match onto the pile of combustibles, humming to herself. The flame caught.

"Hocus pocus mucus Marcus," improvised June.

Mama-Lou slapped her shoulders, breasts, hips, and thighs with gestures Richard had seen performed by warlocks, witches, and morris-dancers. She added certain herbs to the fire, filling the studio with a rich, pungent, not-unpleasant musk. Mama-Lou shook herself into a trance, channelling her patron, Erzulie Freda. She invoked others of her island pantheon, reciting the "Litanie des Saints." Damballah Wedo, Lord Shango, Papa Legba.

And Baron Samedi. The Saturday Man.

When the barbeque was fully alight, Richard laid the producer's hat into the bed of flames.

They watched until everything was burned down to ashes.

Then they filled the urn.

Richard fastened the lid.

"Now, the seal of Erzulie Freda," announced Mama-Lou. She surprised June O'Dell with a deep, open-mouthed kiss and then applied herself to Richard with nips and an agile tongue. The Wardrobe Mistress' personal loa was the Haitian goddess of love and sensuality. He would have to admit he knew how ceremonies performed under the patronage of Erzulie Freda were traditionally concluded.

Mama-Lou pulled him and June toward Mavis Barstow's enormous Fresian cowhide three-piece suite, elbows crooked around their necks, lips active against their faces. She had a lot of strength in her arms. This development came as something of a shock to June, but Mama-Lou whispered something to her in French which made reservations evaporate. The actress became as light on her feet as she was on her platform-skates and slipped busy fingers inside Richard's shirt.

He remembered the star's hunger and the consequences for unwary ghosts. He must be careful not to let her leech away too much of him. She had used up the best part of her husband, literally. But Mama-Lou was strong too, with a different kind of hunger, a different kind of need.

Two bodies, one very pale, one very black, wound around him and each other. And two spirits, burning inside the bodies, pulled at him.

When he told Barbara about the evening, he would tactfully omit this next stage of the ritual.

He checked the cameras with quick glances. They were hooded. The red recording lights were off.

Which was a mercy.

June and Mama-Lou impatiently helped him off with his trousers. Richard thought of England, then remembered he wasn't actually English.

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XIV

Vanessa, of course, saw what had happened in an instant and held it over him all week, exacting numerous favours. She obviously told Fred, and he went around looking at his "guv'nor" with envious awe. Richard was not entirely comfortable with his own behaviour and took care to be exceptionally solicitous to Barbara, which—later on the night in question—involved a fairly heroic effort in their shared bedroom. He put his evident success down to the lingering effect of Mama-Lou's voodoo herbs rather than the strength of his own amative constitution. Now he was glad, not only that he had not been found out by the professor, but that a night spent with her had followed his hour or so under the spell of Erzulie Freda.

Being open to the feelings of others often led him into choppy waters and he was not about to excuse himself on the grounds of diminished responsibility. He accepted the less admirable, very male, elements of his makeup and determined to rein them in more effectively. The Swinging Sixties were over, and this ought to be the Sensible (or at least, the Sober) Seventies. Besides, he could self-diagnose the symptoms and knew he was falling in love with Barbara Corri.

It was his gift to know how other people felt. All the time. Without fail. But with one exception. He could tell when a woman was attracted to him. He could tell when she was infuriated with him and performing a supernatural feat by concealing it from the world. But he could not tell if a woman he loved even liked him. If Barbara were in love with him, she'd have to come straight out and say so. Even then, he was no more able to tell if she meant it than anyone else in the world could. It struck him that this blind spot was probably the one thing, along with his unique upbringing under the aegis of the Diogenes Club, that prevented him from

becoming a monster.

Too many people with talents went bad.

Look at Marcus Squiers. Obviously, the fellow had some raw abilities, or he'd never have been able to co-opt the arcana to a criminal venture. He could have used the influence of The Northern Barstows over the viewing public for good. Or he could have left well enough alone and concentrated on making better TV programmes.

"I wonder if he hit on this by accident," Barbara said on Monday morning as they sat on the studio lawn. They watched Leslie and Gaye, who had grown close over the last fortnight, console each other before the taping of the worst-concealed surprise twist in Barstows history—their deaths. "I keep thinking of Brenda's black baby. The way apparently the whole audience changed opinion when Mavis did. That might have been when it started."

"There was Karen Finch," said Richard.

"She must have been the first victim. The Bogus Brenda was her doll. What happened to BB on the programme happened to her in life. Not killed, but certainly her options were limited."

"Barbara?" he held her hand.

"Yes?"

"I won't let him murder us. What we did this weekend will work. In the end, Squiers is an amateur and I am a professional."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Leslie and Gaye embracing, in tears.

He kissed Barbara and thought, for a moment, he knew how she felt.

Then it was gone again, and he found himself looking at her face and wondering.

"You know," she said. "I can never tell what you're thinking."

"Good. I'd hate to spoil any more surprises."

She laughed, like the sun coming out.

"So, do you want to watch our heads getting chopped off?"

"Why not?"

He took her arm, and they walked across the lawn, toward the stage. As they passed, Leslie and Gaye were brushing grass strands off their costumes and getting it together to undergo their career-ending ordeal.

"Cheer up," Richard told them, "it might never happen."

"Easy for you to say," snarled Leslie Veneer, with more feeling than any of his line-readings. "You're not the Bloody God of Bleeds."

They arrived on the stage before Leslie and Gaye, and—as had become tediously predictable—an assistant director was hustling them onto the set when the real actors arrived. Everyone's identities got sorted out.

Gerard Loss was nowhere to be seen. Marcus Squiers was directing this scene himself, wearing his rarely seen director's hat—a baseball cap. He sat on a high chair like a tennis umpire and wielded the sort of megaphone Cecil B. DeMille had been fond of until talking pictures came in.

Squiers was surprised to see Richard and Barbara but nodded at them with the kind of magnanimous admiration only someone who thought he'd long since won could show for an already mortally wounded foe he was about to decapitate. Richard waved cheerily back.

Almost all the episode had been taped on Friday. Roget and Canberra were shown up as yet more confidence tricksters (a habitual Barstows plot tic). It turned out they were in with Ben Barstow and had been faking the haunting in order to extort a fortune from Mavis—but this had raised the real angry spirit of Da Barstow, who was about to get his revenge.

Clarence "Gore" Gurney, a special effects man who usually worked on cinema films about Satanic accidents, was hired in at great expense—and with resentful grumbling from the O'D-S makeup people—to supervise the Decapitation of Roget Masterman and, to vary things, the Exploding Head of Canberra Laurinz. Realistic dummies, faces contorted in frozen screams, were held in waiting, tubes and wires fed into slit holes in the backs of their clothes. Richard assumed the dummies now wore the clothes filched from his and Barbara's closets. At last, here were proper voodoo dolls, with hairs stolen from brushes applied to the heads. Tara,

exceeding her wardrobe job, was helping Gurney set up the effects.

Barbara kept looking at the dummies, struck by the terror on her own faked face.

Leslie and Gaye only had to flounder screaming around the set while Dudley-as-Ben begged Da for forgiveness and fire spurted out of the portrait's eyes. Then the actors were hauled off—and essentially kicked out the studio door, final pay packets exchanged for entry lozenges—and the dummies were set up. This took an age.

Lionel dropped by to say hello.

"They'll never get away with this, luv," he said. "Mucus is mental. Grannies in Hartlepool will have heart attacks. Folk tune in to the Barstards to see Mavis being a cow and Northshire idiots whining about the old days over pints of Griddles, not blood and guts all over the shop. It's like the worst bits of James Herbert spewed into front parlours, and the audience won't like it. The duty officer will log a record number of complaints when this airs. Once it's out, ART will come down like a ton of angry bricks. Mark my words."

"We only have one shot at this," announced Squiers through his megaphone. "All three cameras ... make sure you can't see each other or the edge of the set."

Three cameraman gave thumbs-up.

"Gore'?"

Gurney crouched over a wooden control-box studded with lights and switches and plungers like the ones used to detonate cartoon dynamite. He checked all the leads and saluted Squiers.

"Supernatural smoke, please."

Odorous clouds were puffed onto the set by stagehands wielding gadgets like industrial vacuum cleaners on reverse. Finn coughed, and the smoke settled like a grey ground mist.

"Light the picture."

Da's eyes shone. It struck Richard that Marcus Squiers had posed for the portrait.

"Dudley?"

Finn went down on his knees, warily ready.

"... and action!"

Gurney flicked switches, and the dummies flailed with alarming realism. Finn, nervous to be on set with so much explosive, picked up his ranted lines.

"Dr. Laurinz!" shouted Squiers.

Gurney depressed a plunger. The Canberra dummy's head burst, flinging watermelon-bits and cottage cheese across the set. Barbara pressed her face against Richard's collar, unable to watch.

Richard did not miss Squiers' nasty little smile.

The last splatters of the head's contents rained down. Red syrup spurted from the neck as if it were a sugary drinking fountain. The headless dummy toppled over, mechanics inside sparking dangerously.

"... and Masterman!"

Gurney depressed the other plunger.

A rubber axe flew across the set. Richard watched his own head come off, tumble through the air, and fall, still blinking, at the feet of a screaming Ben Barstow.

"Cut! Thank you all very much. You've made TV history."

There was a smattering of applause, mostly from the writing pack who had been let off school especially to watch the deaths.

"The Ti-bloody-tanic made history," said Lionel, who was annoyed to get gluey red cornstarch on his Clark's tracker shoes.

"What do you think, Mr. Jeperson?" asked Squiers through his megaphone. "How did it look from down there?"

Richard made an equivocal gesture.

"I'll have to see it go out to be sure."

"Indeed you will. Would you and Professor Corri care to be my guests tomorrow? Because it's a 'special' episode, we're having a select celebration here at the studio. We can watch you die and then have canapés and wine. It'll be a treat. Are you up for it?"

Barbara was white-lipped with fury and terror but rigidly self-possessed, refusing to let Squiers see. Richard's blood was up too, but he was calm. He'd seen the worst, and it wasn't so bad.

"We wouldn't miss it for the world," he said.

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XV

"You're early," said Squiers.

"I thought we might not get the chance to chat later."

Squiers was surprised, calculated a moment, then chose to laugh.

Coolly, Richard sauntered down the aisle of the small, luxurious screening room, fingers brushing the leatherette of the upholstered seats. Squiers stood in front of a wall of colour television sets turned on and tuned to ITV but with the sound off, images repeated as if through insect eyes. A quiz programme was on, the grinning host in a silver tuxedo dropping contestants into vats of gunk when they failed to answer correctly, showgirls in spangly tights posed by washer-dryers and Triumph TR-7s, mutant puppets popping up between the rounds to do silent slapstick. No wonder Richard preferred reading.

Squiers wore a different hat tonight, a large purple Stetson, with bootlace tie, orange ruffle shirt, faux-buckskin tuxedo, and rawhide cowboy boots with stack heels and spurs. Richard intuited that the ten-gallon tifter was the writer-producer's "party hat." Marcus Squiers saw himself as a gunslinger.

"Nice threads, Squiers."

"Thank you, Mr. Masterman."

"Jeperson. Masterman is your fellow. The one on TV."

"I was forgetting. It's easy to get mixed up."

"I suppose it is."

Richard was not what Squiers expected. In the producer's mind, Richard (and Barbara) ought to be getting sweaty, nervous, close to panic, sensing the trap closing, feeling a frightful fiend's breath warming their backs. They should be jitterily trying to evade the inescapable, pass mrjamesian runes on to some other mug, get out of the way of safes and grand pianos fated to fall from the skies.

Disappointment roiled off Squiers, who—as ever—was the sweaty one.

For him, this should have been a new pleasure. All his previous marks had been unaware of the gunsights fixed on their foreheads. Richard knew what was happening and was powerless to dodge the bullet. This was the first time Squiers could afford to let anyone know how clever he had been.

"It was Junie's fault," said Squiers. "That first serial, just six weeks of it, was damn good telly. Damn good writing. Better than your Dennis Potter or Alan Plater any night of the week. Junie was good in it. She's always been able to play Mavis. She was the one who pushed for the series. I wanted to go on to other things. Plays, films, novels. I could have, you know. I had ideas, ready to go. But Junie tied me to the Barstards. The things she did. You wouldn't believe. The first few years, I kept trying to quit and she'd wrestle me back. There was never much money. Muggins here got stuck with his 196-flaming-4 salary, while the Moo's fees climbed to the sky. Read the bloody small print—first rule of showbiz. There were other ways to keep me on the hook. Even when we weren't married anymore, she'd find means. 'No one else can produce the show,' she says. 'No one.' Who would want to? I mean, have you watched it?"

Richard nodded.

"I have to live with it. So there might as well be some use in it."

"Your discovery?"

"Yes," the bitterness turned sly. A petulant smile crept in, barely covering his teeth. "That's a good way of putting it. The discovery."

"It must be galling to waste shots on Roget and Canberra. I mean, who's to pay for us?"

Squiers chuckled.

"Oh, there's a purpose to you. Nothing goes to waste in television. I have a select company joining us for this party. But you and Professor Corri are my guests of honour. Where is she, by the way?"

"Present," said Barbara.

She wore a bias-cut tangerine evening gown, with matching blooms in her hair and on her shoulder. She stood a moment in the doorway, then glided down. Squiers applauded. Richard kissed her.

"You make a lovely couple," said Squiers. "But you'll be lovelier without heads."

Richard felt an itch around the neck. It was becoming quite persistent.

Barbara was wound tight. Her arm around his waist was nearly rigid with suppressed terror.

"If you haven't learned something by the end of the evening," said Squiers. "I'll eat my hat."

"And what a fine hat it is," said Richard.

The room filled up. The theatre seats took up barely a quarter of the screening room, which was otherwise available for general milling and swilling. Minions in black and white livery weaved among the guests with trays of food: little cubes of cheese and pineapple on sticks; champagne glasses stuffed with prawns, lettuce, and pink mayonnaise; quartered individual pork pies, with dollops of Branston's pickle; fans of "After Eight" mints; ashtrays of foil-wrapped Rose's chocolates. A barman served wine (Mateus Rosé, Blue Nun, Black Tower) and beer (Watney's Red Barrel, Whitbread Trophy Bitter, Double Diamond). There had been an attempt to market a real Griddles Ale, but it was not successful—beer connoisseurs reckoned the cold tea they drank on telly had a better flavour.

Not everyone from O'D-S was here. Richard and Barbara kept score. Anyone on this guest list was almost certainly in it with Squiers; the rest were on the outside and innocent. So far, the guiltyies ran to Tara (no surprise), Dudley Finn (but not his boyfriend), Jeanne Treece, and a good three-quarters of the writing pack. Lionel was evidently guiltless, and so was Gerard Loss. Some people surprised you.

Squiers whizzed about, ten-gallon hat bobbing among a sea of heads, pressing the flesh, meeting and greeting. Richard saw three people come in who were his own invitees. Squiers had pause when he recognised Vanessa but clearly had no idea who Fred was and was puzzled to see the third added guest, whom he must be dimly aware of but couldn't put a name to. That was another black mark against Evil on the scoreboard.

Richard was about to make introductions when a fresh knot of outside guests appeared and Squiers barged through the crowd to welcome them, sweatily unctuous and eager.

Now Richard understood Squiers' crack about nothing going to waste in television.

"Good grief," he said, "we're starring in a sales pitch!"

Squiers led his VIP guests down the aisle toward Richard and company. Richard sensed Vanessa and Fred, dapper book-ends in white matador-cut tuxedos, taking flanking defensive positions. Good move.

As Squiers grinned and got closer, Richard saw Mama-Lou and June O'Dell—as near to disguised as they could manage—slip in and take seats hunched down in the back row, huge hat-brims over their faces.

"Mr. Jeperson, Professor Corri," said Squiers. "I'd like you to meet some people. Prospective sponsors. This is Adam Onions."

"O-nye-ons," corrected a youngish man in a blazer and polo-neck. "Not like the vegetable."

He stuck out a hand, which Richard opted not to shake.

"Hello, Barb," said Onions, shyly fluttering his fingers.

The professor was furious at Onions' presence, which she took as a personal betrayal.

Richard guessed how Onions fit in. He was from the Brighton University Department of Parapsychology. Barbara had talked to him before getting involved with the Diogenes Club. His ambition must have been piqued, along with his curiosity. He had made connections and ridden the hobbyhorse.

"I'm with a government think tank now," he said. "The Institute of Psi Technology. Pronounced 'Eyesight.' We're getting in a position to be competitive, Mr. Jeperson. Your gentlemen's club has had the field to itself

for too long. Your record is astounding, but your horizons have been limited. Effort has been wasted smashing what should be measured. There are applications. Profitable, socially valuable, cutting edge."

Richard could guess what Onions' political masters would want to cut with their edge.

"Heather Wilding," continued Squiers, indicating a woman with a ring-of-confidence smile, slightly ovoid pupils like cat's-eyes, feathery waves of honey-blond Farrah hair, and a tailored red velour suit with maxi-skirt and shoulderpads. "She represents ..."

"I know what Miss Wilding represents."

"Ms.," said the woman, who was American.

"Private enterprise," commented Richard. "Very enterprising enterprise."

Heather Wilding was a name Richard had come across before. She fronted for Derek Leech, the newspaper proprietor (of the Comet, among other organs) who sat at the top of a pyramid of interlinked corporations and was just becoming a major dark presence in the world. Leech was taking an ever-greater interest in television, so his representation here should not be a surprise. This woman sat on the Devil's left hand and fed him fondue.

"And this is General Skinner. He's with NATO."

The general was in uniform, with a chest-spread of medal-ribbons and a pearl-handled sidearm. Over classically handsome bone structure was stretched the skin of a white lizard, making his whole face an expressionless, long-healed scar. He was the single most terrifying individual Richard had ever met. How long had this man-shaped creature walked among humanity? Some of his medals were from wars not fought in this century. Not a lot of people must notice that.

"Mr. Jeperson," said Skinner. "You. Have. Been. Noticed."

No response was required. A restraining order had been served. Richard was eager to look away from the shark to consider the trailing minnows.

"Mr. Topazio and Mr. Maltese are ..."

"Olive-oil importers?" Richard suggested.

The little old men with scarred knuckles and gold rings caught the joke at once—it was a reference to the legitimate business of the Corleones in *The Godfather*—but it went over Squiers' head. These must be his longest-standing clients, the fellows who had interests in seeing Jamie Hepplethwaites and Queenie Tolliver out of the picture. Did they feel uneasy at the ever more high-flying company? How could their poor little organised criminal business compete with government departments out to declare psychic war, a monster with the resources of the military-industrial master-planners at his disposal, or the tentacles of a hellfire-fed multimedia empire? Richard wondered if old-fashioned crims would even get bones thrown to them when Squiers took *The Northern Barstows* up in the world.

He had been worried about ad-men getting hold of Squiers' voodoo. Now—though Derek Leech had his claws deep into that business too—he saw there were worse things waiting. He had a bubble of amusement at the thought of what would have to be written into *The Barstows* if these powers took over—earthquakes in countries a long way from Northshire, economic upheavals on a global scale, mass suicides among unfriendly governments. The poor old *Barstows* would have to expand their field of operations, spreading misery and devastation wherever they went.

If Richard knew who Squiers' guests were and what they represented, Squiers was still puzzling over Richard's third extra guest.

"Have we met?" Squiers asked.

"Good heavens no," said Lady Damaris Gideon, casting a pink eye over the fellow. "Whyever should we have? On the Amalgamated Rediffusion Board, we don't care to deal with tradesmen."

Maybe Squiers saw what was coming. His grin almost froze.

Lights went down and sound came up on the televisions. There was a hustle to get into seats. Richard found himself between Barbara, who held his hand fiercely, and Onions, who settled back with a prawn cocktail in one hand and a tiny fork in the other. The *Barstows* theme came out of all the speakers.

"This is going out to an estimated audience of nineteen million nationwide," said Squiers, over the music. "Five OAPs and a dog are watching the *Dad's Army* repeat on BBC1. If BBC2 are putting out the test card

instead of the classical music quiz literally no one will notice. Our poltergeist plot has pulled in new viewers. Under other circumstances, we'd keep Roget and Canberra on board. They've proved popular. However, you know what they say in writing class, 'Kill your darlings.'

In the first scene, Ben Barstow was down the Grand Old Duke, sinking pints of Griddles and blathering about the horrific events up at the Barstow house. All the extras were impressed. Bev the barmaid crossed herself.

Then Roget and Canberra were on screen, setting up mystical equipment in the lounge—an electric pentagram, bells on strings, black-out sheets scrawled with white symbols.

Onions snorted at this arcane nonsense.

"There's no science in that."

The academic was shushed from all around the room. Mavis had a "When I were a lass" speech coming up.

At the end of the scene as scripted was a moment when the fraudsters let their guards slip after Mavis has left the room and chuckle over their scam. In the programme as broadcast, the end-of-part-one card came up early and the network cut to adverts.

Squiers saw at once that this wasn't the show he had written, produced, directed, edited, and handed over to ART for transmission. With VIPs in the room, he couldn't make a fuss, but he did hurry out to try to make an urgent call. He came back ghost-faced and shaking. Fred had disabled the studio's external telephone lines. Even the Phantom Phoner could not get out.

During the ad break, Richard looked away from the screens and was amused to notice Heather Wilding shielding her eyes too. A wrestler known for his thick pelt plastered on the Fr?t and got a grip on a girl in a bathing suit—without ever having seen the advert, it had seeped into Richard's consciousness, which ticked him off. Skinner's strange face reflected the highly-coloured images sliding across the wall of screens. Topazio was asleep and snoring gently, as Maltese tossed peanuts like George Raft spinning a coin and caught them with his mouth.

On the way back to his seat, Squiers saw June in the audience. She bent up her hat-brim and blew him a kiss. Her presence was a blow to his heart. He was unsteady on his feet the rest of the way. When he sat down, he slipped off his Stetson and unconsciously began to chew the leather.

After the adverts, the new material took over. Though she had studied The Northern Barstows from the beginning, Barbara found it surprisingly difficult to pastiche even a few scenes of script. After hours of effort, she came up with six typewritten pages, which June scrawled all over with her magic marker—some sort of seal of approval Richard frankly didn't understand, but which the professor did. Considering she was writing on and appearing in her specialist subject, she had crossed an academic line which might be hard to hop back over. They had taped their alternate scene over the weekend, using technicians bound to a vow of secrecy by Super-Golden Time wages. June, who authorised the expense in her capacity as a controlling interest in O'Dell-Squiers, participated as if it were a regular episode, while Mama-Lou fussed over the costumes. Richard had worried that sparks might combust between the three women, with unfortunate revelations to follow—but he had defused several potential mines.

On screen, Roget and Canberra began a ritual of exorcism.

Fred laughed out loud, realising he was now watching Richard and Barbara, not Leslie and Gaye. Few others in the room noticed the switch, which was a tribute to the casting. Some of the pack knew this wasn't what they expected, but they were used to Squiers' "last-minute" changes and accepted what was being broadcast as the authentic Barstows. Squiers had a chunk of leather in his mouth and was chewing steadily. He was indeed eating his hat. His shirt was sweated through.

The ritual was nonsense, of course. If it hadn't been, the characters wouldn't have been Roget and Canberra as established on the programme. It was important to keep consistent, not to break the audience's compact with unlikeliness.

The pentagram crackled, and Da Barstow's urn levitated off the mantel.

Squiers clutched his chest, choking on his hat. Apart from Richard, nobody noticed.

"You ... barstards," Squiers croaked.

The chanting rose, whipping up a supernatural wind in Mavis' lounge. Mavis blundered in, eliciting a round of applause from the audience, and held hands with the ghost-hunters. June had insisted on being in the scene. It was her show, after all.

"Chant after me," said Richard-as-Roget.

June-as-Mavis nodded.

"Spectre of Evil, Spectre of Pain," said Richard-as-Roget.

"Spectre of Evil, Spectre of Pain," echoed Barbara-as-Canberra and June-as-Mavis.

"Begone from this House, Begone from this Plane!"

"Begone from this House, Begone from this Plane!"

The urn wobbled a bit, but winds continued to buffet the exorcising trio, and flash-powder went off around the lounge.

"Spirit of Darkness, Spirit of Gloom ..."

"Spirit of Darkness, Spirit of Gloom ..."

"Return to thy Graveyard, return to thy Tomb!"

"Return to thy Graveyard, return to thy Tomb!"

The lid came off the urn, and flaming ashes sprinkled.

Squiers was severely affected now, jerking and gasping in seizure, ragged-brimmed hat bucking up and down on his lap. The people sat around him noticed. Tara ripped open his shirt, scattering buttons, and pressed his heaving chest.

On the screens, the ashes of Da Barstow—the "doll" of Marcus Squiers—spewed out of the urn in a human-shaped cloud, with trailing limbs and a thickness around the head that was unmistakably a flat cap.

It wasn't even special effects—it was an illusion, a lighting trick.

June-as-Mavis held up a silver crucifix, forged by melting down Da's shove ha'penny champion sovereign. Richard-as-Roget raised a fetish of Erzulie Freda, on loan from Mama-Lou. And Barbara-as-Canberra pulled an old-fashioned toy gun which shot out a flag bearing the word "bang!"

"You were always bloody useless, Darius Barstow," said Mavis at full blast. "Now clear off out of it and leave decent people alone."

"Dispel," said Richard, underplaying.

The cloud of ash exploded, pelting the entire set—it had taken longer to clean up than to shoot the scene—and then vanished.

Dawnlight filtered in on a dimmer switch. Tweeting bird sound effects laid over the settling dust.

The camera rolled toward Mavis, who gave a speech about how the nightmare was over and life in Bleeds could get back to "normal."

There was a commotion around Squiers' seat. Squiers wasn't in it anymore. He wasn't in anything anymore. All that was left was a hat on the floor, a fine scattering of grey ash, and an after-the-firework-display smell.

Tara's hands, which had been against Squiers' chest, were withered, like an arthritic eighty-year-old's. One of her fingers snapped off, but she was too shocked to scream.

The end titles scrolled, and the screening room lights came up.

Richard thanked Lady Dee, without whom the substitution of master tapes could not have been managed. The Board was pleased that the proper order of things had been restored—little companies like O'Dell-Squiers (soon to be O'Dell Holdings) might make television, but networks like Amalgamated Rediffusion owned the airwaves and decided what was fed into the boxes. Squiers had focused on working magic in the making of the show and taken transmission for granted, but Richard had understood the pins didn't skewer the doll until the episode in question was watched by the believing millions.

Wilding and Skinner were gone. Not like Squiers, but leaving fewer traces behind. This hadn't worked out, but they had other irons in the fire—which Richard, or someone like him, would have to deal with eventually.

Adam Onions wasn't in that class yet. He was a nuisance not a danger. The man from IPSIT bubbled around excitedly, scratching at everything, diagnosing a new, unknown form of spontaneous combustion. Richard was more than willing to cede the investigation to him. As he was scooping ash into a bag, Barbara stuck her tongue out at his back. She successfully overcame the temptation to boot his rump, mostly because she

was wearing toeless spiked court shoes over sheer black silk stockings and reckoned permanent damage to her wardrobe not worth the passing pleasure of denting Onions' negligible dignity.

Maltese and Topazio made themselves scarce, but Inspector Price would know where they lived.

"Well done, guv," said Fred.

"Tricky thing, voodoo," said Vanessa. "Not to be trifled with."

On the way out, Richard nodded to June O'Dell. She and Mama-Lou sat in their seats, ignoring the fuss around Squiers' sudden exit from this world. Richard did not doubt that the show would go on. With June wearing the producer's hat.

Richard walked with Barbara. Fred and Vanessa flanked them. Their way to the door was barred. By the writers' pack.

They really looked like a pack now, fangs bared, hunched over, angry at the loss of their alpha, fingers curled into claws. After all this hocus-pocus, Squiers' followers might opt for good old-fashioned violence and rip their enemies to shreds.

Fred and Vanessa tensed, ready for a scrap.

"Heel," said June firmly.

As one, the pack looked to her.

"You lot, there's work to do. I'll be taking more of an interest in the writing from now on. Porko, tomorrow you will sign Leslie Veneer and Gaye Brough to six months' contracts. Roget and Canberra will be staying in Bleeds to mop up after the Bogey. No decapitations necessary."

The chubby writer checked his colleagues' faces and nodded vigorously. The rest agreed with him. June O'Dell was in charge.

"Professor Corri," she said, "we've had our differences, but I'd like to offer you a job as Head Writer. This is yours for the taking ..."

She snatched the school cap from one of the writers' pockets and offered it to Barbara.

"I'll think about it," said the professor.

Beside June, Mama-Lou smiled, eyes glittering.

The Moo and Mistress Voodoo exerted a tug on Barbara, which Richard knew would have an effect. He was more worried about how the professor would fare in the television jungle than he had been when she was only under a deadly curse. But she could take care of herself.

Richard acknowledged these women of power, trusting—against prior experience—they would wield it only for good. He might have to keep watching the blasted programme to make sure they avoided the shadow of the Saturday Man.

He helped the professor, now steady on her feet, out of the room.

The Rolls awaited.

He turned to look into Barbara's eyes and kissed her. Her terror had passed, and new, exciting feelings were creeping in.

"Did we win?" she asked.

"Handsomely," said Richard.

The End

Annotations

1. BBC2. At the time of this story, British television had only three channels. The BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) channels BBC1 and BBC2 were, and remain, free of commercial interruption, supported by the TV license fee; BBC1 is fairly populist, while BBC2 purportedly caters to more select interests. The third channel was ITV (Independent Television), not so much a network as a loose grid of franchise-holding local broadcasters (e.g., Thames Television in the South-East, Westward in the South-West) who carried a great deal of programming in common but with many regional variations. ITV shows might air on different days of

the week and in different timeslots in diverse parts of the country. This author remembers manually retuning the family set to catch the blurry, distant signal of HTV Wales to watch Hammer Films not being shown in our area.

2. Doctor Who. UK TV programme (1963-89, 1996, 2005-) about a time-travelling adventurer, the Doctor (originally William Hartnell).

3. Scotland Yard. The original Scotland Yard, so called because before the union of the crowns of Scotland and England it was a London residence for the Kings of Scotland, was headquarters of the Metropolitan Police from 1820 until 1890, when they moved to New Scotland Yard on the Victoria Embankment. From 1967, the Met has been headquartered in a new New Scotland Yard, which is the place with the revolving sign out front.

4. Daleks. Doctor Who's most persistent foes, introduced in "The Dead Planet" (1963)—machine-encased evil mutants from the Planet Skaro, with distinctive croaking voices ("Ex-ter-min-ate!"). Beneficiaries of a major merchandising blitz in the 1960s—you could even bake Dalek cakes.

5. Autons. Lesser-known alien villains from Doctor Who, introduced in "Spearhead From Space" (1970). They returned in "Terror of the Autons" (1971) and, after a long absence, "Rose" (2005). Plastic entities resembling shop window mannequins.

6. News of the World. British Sunday newspaper, a sensationalist tabloid—known in the 1970s for crime and scandal. In common with other British newspapers now owned by Rupert Murdoch, it has recently become associated with the brand of celebrity muckraking pioneered by US magazines like Confidential—or, in James Ellroy's world, Hush-Hush—in the early '50s.

7. Ealing. A London borough (post-codes W5 and W13). Associated with the now-defunct Ealing Studios, where many famous post-war British films—including the police drama *The Blue Lamp* (1950)—were shot. The police station is at 67-69 Uxbridge Road.

8. Holloway. A women's prison, located in North London.

9. Bluebottle. Slang—police constable. The expression comes from the distinctive British police helmet, which also gives rise to ruder synonyms.

10. Get yer hair cut. From 1945 onward, the moaning battle cry of middle-aged, balding or short-back-and-sides conservatives at the sight of a man or especially youth with long or even long-ish hair. It has fallen into disuse since kids began to opt for shaven heads or elaborate but cropped hairstyles, but isolated incidences persist. As the generations who endured mandatory military haircuts die off, the shout—which tends to betoken a lack of basic manners on the part of the shouter rather than the usually unassuming shouted-at—will fade away completely.

11. Briefs. Slang, lawyers.

12. The Old Bailey. London's Central Criminal Court.

13. Grand National. A horse race, run annually at Aintree racecourse, near Liverpool. It's a steeplechase, over four-and-a-half miles, with thirty fences, including Becher's Brook (famously dangerous). It was first run in 1836.

14. Broadmoor. Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane—now, Broadmoor Hospital—in Berkshire. The largest secure psychiatric facility in the United Kingdom. Past and present inmates include Daniel M'Naghten, would-be assassin of Prime Minister Robert Peel, Richard Dadd, the artist, June and Jennifer Gibbons, "the Silent Twins," and Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper.

15. DS. Detective Sergeant.

16. Zarana. See "Soho Golem," SciFi.com.

17. Primary school. Grade school.

18. Tube. London Underground Railway, i.e., subway or metro.

19. ARP. Air Raid Police, active during World War Two. Catch-phrase: "Put that light out!"

20. That documentary about the Queen eating cornflakes. *The Royal Family*, telecast on BBC1 on June 21, 1969. Sixty-eight percent of the British population watched the (excruciatingly dull) two-hour programme. There was much comment about the hitherto-unrevealed details of the Windsors' dietary habits.

21. Guv. Governor (abbr.), boss, chief.

22. Threadneedle Street. The London address of the Bank of England.
23. Max Bygraves. Born 1922, popular crooner and comedian, top-liner of a string of ITV programmes, including Singalongamax and the quiz show Family Fortunes. Specialised in sentimental novelty songs like "You Need Hands" and "Gilly Gilly Ossenfeffer Katzanellen Bogen by the Sea." Had UK hits with covers of "Mister Sandman," "The Ballad of Davy Crockett," and that monologue "Deck of Cards."
24. Albertine disparue. The sixth volume of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*.
25. MI5. The branch of the British Secret Service concerned with internal security, i.e., counter-intelligence, counter-terrorism.
26. Goodwood. A British racecourse.
27. Make the running. A racing expression—to take the lead or set the pace.
28. The Grauniad. The Guardian, the UK newspaper, often chided for its misprints. The nickname comes from the satirical periodical Private Eye.
29. News of the Screws. Popular nickname for the News of the World.
30. Slap. Slang, makeup.
31. Brighthouse and Rastrick Brass Band. Founded 1881, they had a chart success in 1977, holding the UK number two spot (Paul McCartney kept them from number one) with "The Floral Dance."
32. The Pink Floyd. Well-spoken people, like Richard Jeperson and Michael Moorcock, always use the definite article.
33. Shrewsbury. A women's college at Oxford University. Among Lady Damaris' contemporaries was the crime writer Harriet Vane.
34. Television Monograph. Published by the British Film Institute.
35. Crossroads. ITV soap opera, set in a motel outside Birmingham (and about as exciting as that sounds). It ran from 1964 to 1988 and was briefly revived as an afternoon show in the early 2000s.
36. Coronation Street. The UK's longest-running TV soap (The Archers, on the radio, has been going longer), first broadcast in 1960, set in the fictional Weatherfield, which seems a lot like the real Salford. The present author has never watched a single episode. Just minutes after finishing the story, I saw a story ("CORRIE CALL IN GHOST BUSTER") in the tabloid Daily Star about an alleged haunting on the set of the show which parallels the events of "The Serial Murders." Spooky.
37. Ylang-ylang. Perfume derived from the flower of the cananga (or custard-apple) tree.
38. The National Front. A far-right (oh, all right, fascist) British political party; in the 1970s, openly racist and noisy with it. Currently, the BNP (British National Party).
39. Lose their deposit. To stand in a parliamentary election, a candidate must post a sum of money which is forfeit if they poll less than an eighth of the popular vote. From 1918 to 1985, the deposit was £150; now, it's £500. Though fringe parties of the right, left, and satirical (e.g., The Monster Raving Loony Party) traditionally lose their deposits and aren't fussed about it, any candidate of a major party who suffers this fate is greatly humiliated.
40. Guy Fawkes Night. November the fifth. Aka Bonfire Night. So named for a Catholic plotter who tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament and is still burned in effigy ("the guy") on bonfires. Associated with fireworks displays. In Lewes, Sussex, they symbolically burn the Pope.
41. Eugène Sue. Author (1804-57) of *Les mystères de Paris* (The Mysteries of Paris, 1842-3) and *Le juif errant* (The Wandering Jew, 1845).
42. Whistler forced George du Maurier to rewrite *Trilby* to take out some digs at him. The artist Joseph Whistler objected to a caricature of him as "Joe Sibley" in the serial version of du Maurier's novel—which he rewrote for book publication to omit the offending material. The original version has been restored in modern editions.
43. Clive James. Australian-born cultural commentator, long resident in Britain. He was the TV critic of The Observer from 1972 to 1982; his columns are collected in *Visions Before Midnight* and *The Crystal Bucket*.
44. Rhine cards. Devised by Dr. Karl Zener and J.B. Rhine at Duke University in the 1920s, used to test telepathy, clairvoyance or precognition. Each pack has twenty-five cards; each card shows one of five

symbols (square, circle, wavy lines, star, cross).

45. Rag trade. Garment industry.

46. Haslemere. Mid-sized town in Surrey.

47. The Home Counties. The counties which border London: definitively Surrey, Kent, Middlesex, Essex; arguably Berkshire, Hertfordshire, and Buckinghamshire. The stereotypical haunt of the upper middle-classes. Conservative candidates rarely lose their deposits in Home Counties elections.

48. The Home Service. One of three BBC radio channels—the others being the Light Programme and the Third Programme—from 1939 to 1970; it was replaced by Radio 4, which is still on the air.

49. Celia Johnson. Star of *Brief Encounter*, famous for her clipped, "cut-glass" English accent.

50. Dick Barton, Special Agent. BBC radio adventure serial on the Light Programme, from 1946 to 1951. At the height of its popularity, fifteen million listeners followed the adventures of ex-commando Dick and his pals Jock (a Scotsman) and Snowy (a cockney) as they defied foreign baddies. There were three Dick Barton films in the early '50s.

51. Journey into Space. A series of BBC radio science-fiction serials, broadcast on the Light Programme, beginning with "Operation Luna" in 1953. The hero was well-spoken Captain Jet Morgan.

52. PR. Public Relations.

53. Comet. The Daily Comet, a tabloid owned by media baron Derek Leech.

54. Knight. A girlie magazine.

55. Reptiles. Derogatory slang, yellow-press reporters or paparazzi. The term is often used by people in the PR business.

56. Ginormous. Large.

57. Financial Times. UK equivalent of the Wall Street Journal. Published on pink paper.

58. Cluedo. UK tradename for the board game known in the US as Clue.

59. Fortnum's. Posh department store. Formally, Fortnum and Mason's.

60. Round the Horne. BBC radio comedy programme, hosted by Kenneth Horne. The performers Kenneth Williams and Hugh Paddick played recurring characters, Julian and Sandy, who popularised camp patois ("polari") at a time when male homosexuality was technically a criminal offence. "How bona to vada your eek" means "How nice to see your face."

61. Recce. An initial scout-around. Military slang for "reconnaissance."

62. Mangle-worzel. White turnip. The vegetable, hence the accent, is associated with the West Country (Somerset, Devon, Dorset, Cornwall).

63. Mummerset. Another term for a non-specific West Country accent, like that used by Robert Newton as Long John Silver (or, more often, people impersonating Robert Newton as Long John Silver).

64. Chits. Invoices.

65. Full English. Cooked breakfast.

66. Norton. British make of motorbike.

67. Fred Perry. Type of shirt, named after a tennis player.

68. Torpedo. Outmoded American gangland slang, a hit man or hired gun.

69. Crims. Criminals.

70. Three-piece suite. A sofa and two armchairs, inevitable in the parlours of lower middle-class or upper working-class families with aspirations to gentility.

71. Sides. Theatrical term for an actor's lines.

72. Chivvy. Hurry, hustle.

73. Mangle. US. Mangler, an antique washing implement.

74. Lady Bracknell. Grand dame in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, famous of the line, "A

handbag?"

75. Oiks. Low-class brutes.

76. Marie Lloyd. English music hall artiste of the turn of the century (nineteenth into twentieth). Her song "She Sits Among the Cabbages and Peas" was considered scandalous.

77. Harold Steptoe. The long-suffering son, played by Harry H. Corbett, in the classic BBC TV sitcom Steptoe and Son, which was Americanised as Sanford and Son.

78. Barclay's Bank. High Street bank, much boycotted in the 1970s for its ties with South Africa.

79. Bradford. Town in Yorkshire.

80. Vest. Undershirt, not a waistcoat.

81. Penny for the Guy. The cry of children soliciting coins for showing off their stuffed effigies of Guy Fawkes in the build-up to Guy Fawkes Night.

82. Peter Wyngarde. A '70s icon in the shows Department S and Jason King, playing a dandyish fashion-plate mystery novelist turned detective. He's also in The Innocents as a ghost, Night of the Eagle, the "Touch of Brimstone" episode of The Avengers, and the remake of Flash Gordon.

83. Spotlight. The UK directory of actors.

84. The Ruling Cabal. The governing committee of the Diogenes Club.

85. War on Want. A charity campaign.

86. Structuralists. Followers of a critical school ascendant in academe in the 1970s.

87. Frank Bough. UK TV sports commentator and news presenter, roughly equivalent to Howard Cosell in America.

88. We're on a sticky wicket, up against the ropes, down to the last man, and facing a penalty in injury time. Bad situations in cricket, boxing, cricket and soccer.

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89. Keys-in-a-bowl-parties. A '70s thing. You had to be there. Or maybe best not.

90. Steenbeck. A flatbed editing machine.

91. TV Times. ITV's TV listings magazine.

92. Goolies. Testicles.

93. The worst bits of James Herbert. Usually castration anxiety fantasies with extra adjectives (cf. The Rats, The Fog). The word "nasty," as applied to "video nasties" in the 1980s, was devised to describe the brand of moist paperback horror of which Herbert was the preeminent '70s practitioner, followed by the even more prolific Guy N. Smith (Night of the Crabs, The Sucking Pit).

94. Clark's tracker shoes. They had animal footprints on the soles, so you left tracks with them.

95. Triumph TR-7. Not the best car ever made in Great Britain.

96. Tiffer. Hat. Rhyming slang, tit fer tat = hat.

97. Dennis Potter. UK TV playwright, famous for, among others, Pennies From Heaven and The Singing Detective.

98. Alan Plater. UK TV writer, who debuted on the seminal cop series Z-Cars and has scripted many series and serials, like The Beiderbecke Affair, Flambards, and A Very British Coup.

99. Muggins here. A loser in any transaction.

100. Farrah hair. A 'do popularised by Farrah Fawcett.

101. OAPs. Old-age pensioners.

102. Dad's Army. Classic BBC sitcom set in World War Two, about the Home Guard.

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