

SIMON BRETT
CAST, IN ORDER
OF
DISAPPEARANCE



SH
SEVEN
HOUSE

CRIME & MYSTERY

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A RECONSTRUCTED CORPSE
SICKEN AND SO DIE
DEAD ROOM FARCE

CAST, IN ORDER OF DISAPPEARANCE

A Charles Paris Mystery

Simon Brett



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Cinderella Alone

‘CHARLES, CHARLES LOVE, it’s your cue.

Charles Paris jerked out of his doze. He looked down for the script on his knees, but *The Times* crossword with two completed clues stared blankly up at him. He dropped the paper, opened his script and looked hopefully at the little actress next to him for the page number.

‘Page 27, Line 4,’ the producer snapped with all the exasperation of a large mortgage in Pinner and another nineteen years till his BBC pension.

‘Sorry . . .’ said Charles, trying to remember the producer’s name. ‘Sorry, love,’ failing to do so.

He read his lines with leaden incomprehension. A twinge of guilt for having done no preparation soon passed when he heard the lines he was reading. Wasn’t anyone writing good radio plays any more? As his scene ground to a halt, he looked across at the spindly raffia-haired youth responsible. The Author sat by the producer in a twisted attitude of intense concentration or bad piles. Every now and then he winced as another nuance of his writing was steamrollered.

The play reached its denouement with all the impact of a wet dishcloth, and there was a ripple of dejected laughter. ‘Well,’ said the producer, ‘now the real work starts. But first let’s send the lovely Sylvia for some tea.’

Charles took the opportunity to go to the Gents and lose lunchtime’s excesses of wine. To his annoyance the Author joined him at the adjacent urinal. Charles resolutely pretended he hadn’t noticed.

‘Um, Charles . . .’

‘Yes.’

‘I hope you don’t mind my saying . . .’

‘No, of course not.’

‘Well, I’d seen the Inspector rather Grand Guignol . . .’

‘And I thought you read him rather . . .’

‘Yes . . .?’

‘Well, Petit Guignol.’

‘Ah,’ said Charles Paris. ‘I’ll try to do something about it.’

Even Arctic nights end, and so, somehow, did the day in the studio. Charles’ performance, however Grand its Guignol, was fixed on tape. It all seemed to matter less as he stood in the BBC Club and the first large Bell’s glowed inside him. It was December 3rd and the short walk from Broadcasting House to the Club had been breathtakingly cold after the recycled warmth of the studio.

Sherlock Forster (known to his intimates as Len) was an undemanding companion. A distinguished radio actor and a great piss-artist, he had been playing the murderer in the play and was now slumped against the bar, caressing a large Riesling, his toupee’d head deep into the *Evening Standard*. ‘Hoarding outside said “Motorist Shot Dead”. Thought it might have pushed the bloody Arabs out of the headlines,’ he said to no one in particular.

‘Did it?’ asked Charles.

‘No such luck. Main story’s still bloody petrol queues. “Motorist Shot Dead” is way down the

column.'

'Where'd it happen?'

'Just off the M4 somewhere. Apparently the bloke'd run out of petrol, got out of the car, and some bugger shot him.'

'Poor sod.'

'Police are treating it as a case of murder.'

'Shrewd of them. Anything else in the paper?'

'Well, the Archbishop of Canterbury's being driven round in a Morris Minor to save petrol. And a couple of Cabinet ministers turned up at the House in a Mini.'

'Chauffeur-driven, no doubt.'

The second large Bell's changed the glow within Charles to a feeling of positive well-being. Forty-seven years old and still attractive to women. The lack of matinee-idol good looks which had kept him from being a star in the Fifties was no longer a disadvantage. He had worn better than a lot of his contemporaries. Hair still grew thick and only lightly silvered at the temples. He looked at Len's theatrical toupee and felt grateful.

Life, Charles reflected, was not too bad. Even financially, for once. He was still flush from a ghastly television series in which he'd minced around some unlikely Tudor monarch in doublet and hose for a couple of months. And when he'd drunk through that money, or when the tax man caught up with him, something else would happen. He cast a professional eye round the bar. A few standard-issue BBC spinsters; one or two attractive younger secretaries, sentried by men; nothing worth chatting up.

'Petrol, bloody petrol,' said Len. 'There's nothing else in the paper. Look at this—"Attractive 30-year-old model Patti Winchester isn't worried. She's been showing a leg and riding her bicycle for six months now".'

Charles glanced over. 'Tatty.'

'Hmm. Footballer Bobby Lithgoe has bought a bicycle too.'

'Wow.'

'And Marius Steen has put the Rolls in the garage.'

'Steen? What does it say about him?'

'"Impresario Marius Steen, the man behind such stage successes as *One Thing After Another*, *Who's Afraid of the Big Bed Wolf?* and, of course, his current smash-hit at the King's Theatre, *Sex of One and Half a Dozen of the Other*, phoned today at his Berkshire home, said, "We'll leave the Rolls in the garage and use the Datsun."'"

'He's got a good publicity machine. It's just a straight plug for that bloody *Sex of One . . .*'

'Clocked up a thousand performances last week.'

'God. How revolting.'

'Big party on-stage at the King's on Saturday.'

'It'll probably run forever. There's no justice.' Charles picked up Len's empty glass. 'Another one of those?'

'Why not?'

Predictably the BBC Club had led to the George, the George to a small pub off Drury Lane, and about midnight Charles, having lost Len somewhere along the line, found himself leaning against a banister in the Montrose with a pint in his hand.

The Montrose (a small theatrical drinking club off the Haymarket) was full as usual. A lot of rooms on different levels, shoddy like converted bedsitters, overflowing with actors talking and gesturing.

loudly.

‘... got a ~~Z-Cars~~ coming up. Small part, but nice ...’

and he said to William, “You’ve got as much humour as a crutch!” She was furious ...’

‘... working towards a modern commedia format ...’

‘... ultimately it’s a matter of identity ...’

‘Hello, Charles.’ A voice detached itself from the rest and Charles focused on a small blonde girl in front of him. ‘Jacqui.’

Jacqui had a top-floor flat in Archer Street, opposite a casino, whose lights usually flashed yellow at night. But now with the power restrictions, they were dark. Only the blue glow of a solitary street lamp touched their anaemic neon tubes. But there were still the noises of the casino—the hum and slam of taxis, the shouts of drunkards and the chatter of Chinese gamblers in the street below.

Charles looked at Jacqui with pleasure. She was an actress-cum-dancer-cum-most-things he’d met in pantomime at Worthing. He’d been Baron Hardup, Cinderella’s father; and she had been a Village White Mouse and Court Lady (for the Finale). They’d had quite a pleasant time in Worthing. It was good to see her again.

But she looked upset. Charles filled his glass from the bottle of Southern Comfort and slumped back on to the white fur of the bed, shaking a small oil-lamp on the bedside table. ‘And you can’t get in touch with him?’

‘No. I’ve tried both the houses. And the office.’

‘I wouldn’t worry, Jacqui. He’ll call you.’

‘Maybe.’ She still looked tense and hurt. Strange, how a girl like that, who’d had everyone and done everything, could be so affected by one dirty old man not getting in touch with her. And Marius Steele of all people.

Jacqui stretched out her strong dancer’s legs and stared at her toes. ‘No. He often doesn’t call for weeks on end. He’s moody. Sometimes he doesn’t want me around. I’m his secret vice. Just a tottie. I mean, if he’s going to a do with the Queen Mum, he can’t take a tart along.’ Charles grunted uncomfortably. ‘No, that’s what I am. I don’t really want to be more than that. He’s an old man, he’s nice to me, we have a few giggles, that’s all. It couldn’t possibly last. I know that.’ She sounded as if she was bravely repeating a formula she didn’t believe.

‘When did you last see him?’

‘Saturday afternoon.’

‘For God’s sake, what is it now? Only Monday. Give him a chance.’

‘I know, but this time I think it’s over.’

‘Why?’

‘When I rang, there was a message. Said I wasn’t to contact him again.’

‘Ah.’

Jacqui poured herself a large glass of Southern Comfort and took a savage swallow at it. ‘Bugger him. I’m not going to get miserable about an old sod like that.’ She rose and flopped down on the bed beside Charles. ‘There are other men.’

‘Still older men, I’m afraid.’

‘You’re not old.’

‘I’m forty-seven.’

‘That’s cradle-snatching by my standards,’ she said with a wry laugh. Then she stopped short. ‘Old sod. It’s all because of the knighthood.’

‘Hmm?’

‘His last ambition. Reckoned he might get one this New Year.’

‘Services to the Theatre?’

‘I suppose so. And I suppose I let down the image. Well, I don’t care about him.’ She snuggled up to Charles.

‘Jacqui, am I being used merely for revenge? As a sex object?’

‘Yes. Any objections?’

‘No.’

Charles kissed her gently. He felt protective towards her, as if she might suddenly break down.

Her tongue flickered round the inside of his mouth and they drew apart. ‘You smell like distillery,’ she said.

‘I am a distillery,’ he replied fatuously and hugged her close to him. She had a comforting little body, and the smoky taste of her mouth was familiar. ‘Hmm. We had a good time in Worthing. We were better than the dirty postcards.’

Jacqui smiled closely into his eyes and her hand fumbled for his zip. She couldn’t find the little metal pull-tag. An exasperated breath. ‘You know, Charles, I always think it’s simpler to take your own things off. If you’re both in agreement.’

‘I’m in agreement,’ said Charles. He rolled over to the side of the bed and fumblingly undressed. When he turned round, Jacqui was lying naked on the bed, familiar in the pale street light. ‘Charles.’

‘Must take my socks off. Otherwise I feel like an obscene photo.’

He lay down beside her and hugged her, warm on the fur. They held each other close, hands gliding over soft flesh.

After a few moments Charles rolled away. ‘Not very impressive, am I?’

‘Don’t worry. It doesn’t matter.’

‘No.’ A pause. ‘Sorry. I’m not usually like this.’

‘I know,’ Jacqui said meaningfully. ‘And I know what to do about it.’

He felt her moving, a soft kiss on his stomach, then the warmth of her breath as it strayed downwards. ‘Jacqui, don’t bother. I’m not in the mood. It’s the booze or . . .’

‘OK. Poor old Baron Hardup.’

‘I’m sorry, Jacqui.’

‘Don’t worry. All I really need is a good cuddle.’

‘Tonight I’m afraid that’s all I can offer you.’ And he hugged her very closely like a teddy bear in his arms. In a moment he had sunk into a heavy, but troubled sleep.

The Fairy Godmother

AS CHARLES WALKED past the manicured front gardens of Muswell Hill, he tried to piece together his feelings. It was a long time since he had been so churned up inside. For years life had joggled on from hangover to hangover, with the odd affair between drinks, and nothing had affected him much. But now he felt jumpy and panicky.

Impotence is perhaps not unusual in a man of forty-seven. And anyway it probably wasn't impotence, just the dreaded Distiller's Droop. Nothing to worry about.

But that wasn't the important part of his feelings. There was a change in his attitude to Jacqui. He felt an enormous need to protect the girl, as if, by failing in bed, he had suddenly become responsible for her. She seemed desperately vulnerable, like a child in a pram or an old man in a launderette. Perhaps these were paternal feelings, the sort he had somehow never developed for his daughter.

Together with this new warmth came the knowledge that he had to go and see Frances. 'Marriage' Charles reflected wryly as he clicked open her wrought-iron gate, 'is the last refuge of the impotent.'

She wasn't there. Still at school. Not even six o'clock yet. Charles had a key and let himself in. His hand instinctively found the light-switch.

The house hadn't changed. As ever, a pile of books to be marked on the dining table, concert programmes, an old Edinburgh Festival brochure. Earnest paperbacks about psychology and sociology on the book-shelves. Auntie May's old upright piano with the lid up. And on top, that terrible pose photograph of Juliet with pigtails and a grim smile over the brace on her teeth. Next to it, the puzzling jug. Then that windswept snapshot of him, Charles Paris, taken on holiday on Arran. It was a real L-sleeve photograph. Better than any of that expensive rubbish he'd had done for *Spotlight*.

He resisted the temptation to raid the drinks cupboard, switched on the television and slumped into the sofa they'd bought at Harrods when flush from selling the film rights of his one successful play.

He heard the guarded voice of a newscaster, then the picture buzzed and swelled into life. The news was still dominated by petrol and the prospect of rationing. Charles couldn't get very excited about it.

Police had identified the motorist shot off the M4 at Theale. A blurred snapshot was blown up to fill the screen. It had the expression of a man already dead. There had been no petrol in the victim's car; the back right-hand wing was dented; he had been shot through the head and left by the roadside. Police were still trying to find a motive for the killing.

'In the second day of the Sally Nash trial at the Old Bailey, a 17-year-old girl, Miss C., told of sex parties at London hotels. A lot of show-business people—' Charles switched over to the serious face of Eamonn Andrews talking to someone about petrol rationing. He switched again and got a sizzling snowstorm through which a voice imparted mathematical information.

'Sodding UHF.' He got down on his hands and knees in front of the box and started moving the portable aerial about. The snowstorm varied in intensity. Then he remembered the UHF contrast knob and went round the set to turn it.

'Television repair man.' He'd been too close to the sound to hear Frances come in.

'Hello.' He stood up. 'Look. The picture's perfect.'

'Are you doing an Open University degree?'

'No. I was just getting it right. It's the UHF contrast.'

'Ah.' She looked at him. 'How are you?'

‘Bad.’

‘I thought so. Do you want something to eat?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘That means yes. Did you have lunch?’

‘Pie in a pub.’

‘Ugh.’ Frances went into the kitchen and started opening cupboards. She continued talking through the serving hatch. It was restfully familiar.

‘I went down to see Juliet and Miles at the weekend.’

‘Ah.’

‘Nice to get out of town.’

‘Yes.’

‘They said they’d love to see you. You should go down, it’s a lovely place.’

‘Yes. I will. At some stage. How’s Miles?’

‘Oh, he’s doing very well.’

‘Ah.’ Charles visualised his son-in-law, Miles Taylerson, the rising executive, neat in his executive house on his executive estate in Pangbourne with his executive car and his executive suits and his executive haircut. ‘Do you like Miles, Frances?’

‘Juliet’s very happy with him.’ ‘Which I suppose,’ Charles reflected, ‘is some sort of answer. Thinking of his daughter made him think of Jacqui again and he felt a flutter of panic in his stomach.’

Frances produced the food very quickly. It was a dish with frankfurters and sour cream. Something new. Charles felt jealous at the thought that she was developing, learning new things without him. ‘Tell you what,’ he said, ‘shall I whip down to the off-licence and get a bottle of wine? Make an evening of it.’

‘Charles, I can’t “make an evening of it”. I’ve got to be at a PTA meeting at 7.30.’

‘Parents-Teachers? Oh, but can’t you—’ He stopped. No, you can’t come back to someone you walked out on twelve years ago and expect them to be instantly free. Even if you have kept in touch and had occasional reconciliations. ‘Have a drink together later, maybe.’

‘Maybe. If you’re still here.’

‘I will be.’

‘What is the matter, Charles?’

‘I don’t know. Male menopause?’ It was a phrase he’d read in a colour supplement somewhere. Didn’t really know if it meant anything.

‘You think you’ve got problems,’ said Frances.

She was always busy. Two things about Frances—she was always busy and she was never surprised. These, in moments of compatibility, were her great qualities; in moments of annoyance, her most irritating traits.

The next morning she cooked a large breakfast, brought it up to him in bed, and hurried off to school. Charles lay back on the pillows and felt mellow. He saw the familiar gable of the Jenkins opposite (they’d had the paint work done blue) and felt sentimentality well up inside him.

Each time he came back to Frances, he seemed to feel more sentimental. At first. Then after a few days they’d quarrel or he’d feel claustrophobic and leave again. And go on a blinder.

The impotence panic seemed miles away. It was another person who had felt that nausea of fear in his stomach. Long ago.

They had made love beautifully. Frances’ body was like a well-read book, familiar and comforting.

Her limbs were thinner, the tendons a bit more prominent and the skin of her stomach loose. But she was still soft and warm. They had made love gently and easily, their bodies remembering each other's rhythms. It's something you never forget, Charles reflected. Like riding a bicycle.

He switched on the radio by the bedside. It was tuned to Capital Radio—pop music and jingles. Strange that's what Frances listened to. Strange. It was so easy to condemn her as bourgeois and predictable. When you actually came down to it, everything about her was unexpected. What appeared to be a passive passivity was just the great calm that emanated from her.

When he was dressed, he needed human companionship and so rang his agent. 'Maurice Skelton, *Artistes*,' said a voice.

'Maurice.'

'Who wants him?'

'Maurice, I know that's you. It's me, Charles.'

'Oh, hello. How'd the radio go?'

'Ghastly. It was the worst script I've ever seen.'

'It's work, Charles.'

'Yes, just.'

'Were you rude to anybody?'

'Not very. Not as rude as I felt like being.'

'Who to?'

'The producer.'

'Charles, you can't afford it. Already you'll never get another job on *Doctor Who*.'

'I wasn't very rude. Anything coming up?'

'Some vacancies on the permanent company at Hornchurch.'

'Forget it.'

'Chance of a small part in a *Softly, Softly*.'

'Put my name up.'

'New play at one of these new fringe theatres. About transvestites in a prison. Political overtones. Written by a convict.'

'It's not really *me*, is it, Maurice?' in his best theatrical knight voice.

'I don't know what is *you* any more, Charles. I sometimes wonder if you want to work at all.'

'Hmm. So do I.'

'What are you living on at the moment?'

'My second childhood.'

'I don't get ten per cent of that.'

'No. What else is new?'

'Nothing.'

'Come on. Give us the dirt.'

'Isn't any. Well, except for the Sally Nash business . . .'

'Oh yes?'

'Well, you know who the disc jockey was, for a start . . .'

 And Maurice started. He was one of London's recognised authorities on theatrical gossip. Malicious rumour had it that he kept a wall-chart with coloured pins on who was sleeping with who. The Sally Nash case gave him good copy. It was the Lambton affair of the theatre, complete with whips, boots, two-way mirrors and unnamed 'show business personalities'. For half an hour Maurice named them all. Eventually, he rang off. That's why he was such a lousy agent. Spent all his time gossiping.

By the Thursday morning Charles' mellowness felt more fragile. When he woke at nine, Frances had already gone to school. He tottered downstairs and made some coffee to counteract the last night's Beaujolais. The coffee tasted foul. Laced with Scotch, it tasted better. He drank it down, poured a glass of neat Scotch and went upstairs to dress.

The inside of his shirt collar had dark wrinkles of dirt, and his socks made their presence felt. So he'd have to get Frances to wash something or go back to Hereford Road and pick up some more clothes.

He sloped back downstairs. Frances' *Guardian* was neatly folded on the hall chest. No time to read it at school. Organised read in the evening. It had to be the *Guardian*.

Charles slumped on to the Harrods sofa and started reading an article on recycling waste paper. It failed to hold his attention. He checked the television times and switched on *Play School*. The picture was muzzy. He started fiddling with the UHF contrast knob. The phone rang.

'Hello.'

'Charles.'

'Jacqui. Where on earth did you get this number?'

'You gave it me ages ago. Said you were contactable there in the last resort.'

'Yes. I suppose it is my last resort. What's up?'

'It's about Marius.'

'Yes?'

'I tried to contact him again. Went to the house in Bayswater. It was a stupid thing to do, I suppose. Should've left him alone. Should be able to take a bloody hint. I don't know.'

'What happened?'

'He wasn't there. But this morning I had a letter.'

'From Marius?'

'Yes. It wasn't signed, but it must be. It's horrid. Charles, I'm shit-scared.'

'Shall I come round?'

'Can you?'

'Yes.' A pause. 'Why did you ring me, Jacqui?'

'Couldn't think of anyone else.'

After he had put the phone down, Charles switched off *Play School*. He took an old envelope from the table and wrote on it in red felt pen, 'THANKS. GOODBYE. SEE YOU.' Then he left the house and set out for Highgate tube station.

Who Was at the Ball

CHARLES LOOKED AT the sheet of paper. It was pale blue with a dark bevelled edge and, on it scrawled in black biro capitals, was an uncompromising message. Basically, it told Jacqui to get lost when she wasn't wanted. And basically was the way it was done. The language was disgusting and the note anonymous. 'Charming. Are you sure it's from him?'

'No one else had any reason.'

'And is the language in character?'

'Yes, he never was very delicate. Particularly when he was angry. Could be quite frightening.'

'Paper familiar?'

'Yes. He had it on his desk at Orme Gardens. Some headed, some plain like this.'

'Hmm. Well, there's only one way to treat shit of this sort.' Charles screwed the note up into a dark glass ashtray and set it on fire with the table lighter. When the flame had gone, he blew the black ash carefully into the waste-paper basket. 'When did it come?'

'It was on the mat when I got up. About eleven. A bit after.'

'Come by post?'

'No. Plain envelope. On the table.'

Charles leant over and picked it up. Blue, matching the paper. Told him nothing. 'And I suppose you didn't . . .'

'See anyone? No.'

'It's a fairly nasty way of breaking something off, isn't it?'

'Yes.' She looked near to tears. 'And I thought it was going so well.'

'Perhaps he's just a nasty man.'

'He could be, I know. But with me he was always kind. When we were in France, he—'

'When was this?'

'We went in August, came back in October. Marius's got a villa down the South. Sainte-Maxime. It's a lovely place. Private beach.'

'Very nice.'

'Anyway, he took me there to recuperate.'

'What from?'

'I'd had an abortion.'

'His baby?'

'Yes. He fixed it up, but it didn't quite go right. I was ill. So he took me out to Sainte-Maxime.'

'And he was there all the time?'

'Yes. He'd been ill too—had a minor heart-attack. He was meant to be resting, though, of course. Being Marius, he was in touch with the office every day.'

'It was just the two of you out there?'

'Mostly. Some friends of his dropped in, theatre people. And Nigel for a bit.'

'Nigel?'

'His son.'

'Oh yes.' Charles remembered someone once mentioning that Steen had a son. 'I didn't think the
got on.'

‘That was ages ago. They made it up, more or less. Nigel works in the business.’

‘And while you were out in France, it was all OK? Between you and Marius?’

‘Yes. We had a marvellous time. He was very silly and childish. And kind.’

‘And now he sends you notes like that. You can’t think of any reason for the change in his attitude?’

Jacqui hesitated. ‘No. Would you like some lunch?’

While she cooked, Charles went down to the off-licence and bought a bottle of wine. It was obvious from Jacqui’s manner that she did have an idea why Steen had changed. And that she was going to tell him. It was only a matter of waiting.

The lunch was unremarkable. Jacqui was a frozen food cook. He remembered it from Worthing. Endless beef-burgers and cod steaks with bright peas and diced vegetables. But the wine made it passable. They talked back to Worthing, hedging round the subject of Steen. Eventually, as Charles drained the bottle evenly into their two glasses, he asked, ‘What do you want me to do, Jacqui?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’ve brought me round here for a reason.’

‘I was frightened.’

‘Yes, but there’s something else.’

‘Yes.’ She looked very vulnerable. Again he felt the sense of debt that had started when he failed her in bed. The contract was unfulfilled. If he could not serve her in one way, he would serve her in another. It’s strange, he thought, is this what chivalry’s come to?

‘I do want you to do something for me, Charles. It’s sort of awkward. You see, I think I know . . . I think I might know why Marius is behaving like this. He might think . . . you see . . .’ Charles bided his time. Jacqui looked at him directly and said, ‘You’ve heard of all this Sally Nash business?’

‘Yes. Is Marius involved in that?’

‘Not really. Not with the prostitutes. It’s just . . . well, she, Sally Nash, used to be at some parties that we went to.’

‘Just ordinary parties?’

‘Well . . .’ Jacqui smiled sheepishly. ‘No, not ordinary parties really. Things happened.’

‘I didn’t know that was your scene. I thought you only slept with one man at a time and . . .’ Charles tailed off, embarrassed.

‘No, it’s not my sort of thing. But Marius was into all that. Only a bit. Nothing very serious.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Don’t sound so bloody superior. It’s easy for a man. If you’re a girl you have to get interested in what your bloke’s interested in. If he’s mad on football, you watch *Match of the Day*. If it’s two-women mirrors, well . . .’

‘Was it like that in the South of France?’

‘No. It was only a couple of times we ever did it. Last June. There was a party in Holland Park, and one near Marble Arch.’

‘But they were Sally Nash’s parties?’

‘She was there.’

‘And what’s the danger? Are you going to be called as a witness?’

‘Bloody hell.’ She looked very affronted. ‘Look, I may be a tart, but I’m not a whore.’ Charles tried vaguely to work out the distinction, but fortunately Jacqui clarified. ‘All these girls they’re calling the trial do it for money.’

‘I’m sorry. Then what’s the . . .?’

‘There are some photographs.’

‘Of you and Steen at the party?’

‘Yes. With some other people.’

‘Naughty photos?’

‘A bit naughty. But I think that’s why Marius doesn’t want to be seen with me.’

‘Why? Are the photographs going to come up in court?’

‘No, they aren’t. But Marius must think they will. It’s the only explanation.’

‘But if you’re both in the photos, he could be identified anyway. It doesn’t make any difference whether he’s seen with you or not.’

‘No, Charles. The point is, they can’t tell it’s him. His face is covered.’

‘Don’t tell me—with a black leather mask.’

‘Yes.’

‘Really? I was joking.’

‘Well it is.’

‘But you, on the other hand, are not covered?’

‘No. Far from it.’

‘Hmm. How do you know they won’t come up in court?’

‘Because I’ve got them. I paid a lot of money for them.’

‘Did someone blackmail you?’

‘No. The Sally Nash trial started on Friday, and I bought them off the bloke who took them on Saturday.’

‘How much?’

‘Thousand quid.’

Charles looked at her quizzically and she explained. ‘Marius had given me some money to buy a car, but it hardly seems worth buying one now, with all this petrol scene.’

Charles reflected momentarily on the difference between a tart and a whore and decided he was being a bit harsh. Particularly as Jacqui continued, ‘I wanted to give them to Marius as a present. So his mind at rest. And now I can’t get to see him. I daren’t send them through the post or letter-box because his secretary’ll see them . . .’

Suddenly Charles’ role in the proceedings became very clear to him. ‘And so you want me to deliver them?’

Armed with an innocuous-looking brown envelope, Charles Paris returned to his room in Hereford Road, Bayswater. It was a depressing furnished bedsitter, which he’d moved into when he left France. Nothing except his clothes and scripts gave it any identity. The furniture had been painted grey by some earlier occupant, but was mostly obscured by drip-dry shirts on wire hangers. A low upholstered chair with wooden arms sat in front of the gas-fire. There was a small table covered with paper and carbons, a rickety kitchen chair, a single bed shrouded in yellow candlewick, and in one corner inadequately hidden by plastic curtain, a sink and gas-ring.

Whenever Charles entered the room, fumes of depression threatened to choke him. Every now and then, in a surge of confidence, he would consider moving, but he never got round to it. The room was somewhere to sleep and he did his best to ensure that that was all he did there.

He got back about five and, before the atmosphere of the room had time to immobilise him, opened the cupboard, got out a half-full bottle of Bell’s and poured himself a healthy measure. After a substantial swallow, he felt he could look at his surroundings. It was more of a mess than usual. Candlewick in disarray on the unmade bed, coffee cup with a white crust on the table. Cold December

air was gushing through the open window. He remembered leaving it to air the place on . . . when was it? Monday? Yes, Monday, 3rd December. The day he'd done that bloody awful radio play.

He slammed the window and put on the gas-fire. It hissed resentfully but came alight (which was more than it sometimes did). He felt strongly in need of a bath, stripped off his grubby clothes and put on a shapeless towelling dressing-gown. Taking a fivepence from his change, he went down to the bathroom on the first landing, checked that the water wasn't running hot, and fed the meter.

Then he remembered soap and towel. Upstairs again to get them. Inevitably, the bathroom door was locked when he returned. The sound of running water came from inside.

Charles hammered on the door and shouted abuse, but the strange singsong voice that replied over the sound of water told him it was useless. One of the Swedish girls. There seemed to be hundreds of them in the house. And, he thought as he savagely stumped upstairs, all of them old boots. They really shattered the myth of Scandinavian beauty, that lot. Spotty girls with glasses and ruggerplayers' legs. He slammed the door, picked up the whisky bottle and fell into the chair.

The gas-fire spluttered at him as he sat and thought. There was something odd about the whole business with Jacqui. Her explanation about the photographs seemed unconvincing. In fact, her account of Steen's sudden change of behaviour didn't ring true either. A man in his position who wanted to get rid of a girl-friend needn't go to the length of obscene notes.

For a moment the thought crossed Charles' mind that he was being used in some sort of plot. To carry something. What? Drugs? Or just what Jacqui said it was—dirty pictures? But it seemed ridiculous. A much simpler explanation was that she was telling the truth.

The way to find out, of course, was to look in the envelope. He'd known since he had had the photographs that sooner or later he would. And, he reasoned, Jacqui must have assumed he would. She hadn't asked him not to; the envelope was unsealed. But he still felt slightly guilty as he shuffled the photographs into his hand.

There were six, and they were exactly what Jacqui had said they would be—obscene pictures of her and Marius Steen. Perhaps obscene was the wrong word; they didn't have any erotic effect on Charles but they intrigued and rather revolted him.

The photographs had the posed quality of amateur dramatics. Steen's body was old, a thin belly and limbs like a chicken's. The tatty little leather mask made him look ridiculous. But, Charles was forced to admit, the old man was rather well endowed.

But it was the sight of Jacqui that affected him. There she was in a series of contrived positions—astride Steen, bending down in front of him, under him on a bed. The sight was a severe shock to Charles; it made him feel almost sick. Not the acts that were going on; he'd seen and done worse, and somehow they seemed very mild and meaningless on these shoddy little snapshots. But it was the fact that it was Jacqui which upset him. He didn't feel jealousy or lust, but pity and again the urgent desire to protect her. It was as if he was seeing the photographs as her father.

A click and silence told him that the gas meter had run out. Blast, he hadn't got a ten p. Brusquely he shoved the photographs back into the envelope, sealed it and dressed. Then he started his campaign to get to see Marius Steen. It was half past seven. He went to the call box on the landing and rang up Bernard Walton, currently starring in *Virgin on the Ridiculous* at the Dryden Theatre.

Prince Charming

GEORGE, THE STAGE doorman at the Dryden Theatre, looked at him suspiciously. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Charles Paris. Mr Walton is expecting me.’

George’s face registered total disbelief and he turned to the telephone. Charles wondered vaguely if the old man had recognised him. After all, he’d come in every night for eighteen months during the run of *The Water Nymph* only ten years before. But no, the name Charles Paris meant nothing. So much for the showbiz myth of the cheery old ‘never forget a face—I seen ’em all’ doorman. George was a bloody-minded old sod and always had been.

‘Mr Walton’s not back in his dressing-room yet.’

‘I’ll wait.’ Charles leant against the wall. The doorman watched his visitor as if he expected him to steal the light fittings.

There was a big poster of the show stuck up just inside the stage door. It had on it an enormous photo of Bernard in hot pursuit of a cartoon of two bikini-clad girls. That’s stardom—a real photo supports only get cartoons.

Charles thought back to when he’d first met Bernard in Cardiff—a gauche, rather insecure young man with a slight stammer. Even then he’d been pushy, determined to make it. Charles had been directing at the time and cast him as Young Marlowe in *She Stoops to Conquer*. Not a good actor, but Charles made him play himself and it worked. The stammer fitted Marlowe’s embarrassment and Bernard got a very good press. A couple of years round the reps playing nervous idiots, then a television series, and now, entering his second year in *Virgin on the Ridiculous*, nauseating the critics and wowing the coach parties.

‘Could you try him again?’ George acquiesced grudgingly. This time he got through. ‘Mr Walton says there’s a Mr—what did you say your name was?’

‘Charles Paris.’

‘A Mr Charles Paris to see you. Oh. Very well.’ He put the phone down. ‘Mr Walton’s expecting you.’ In tones of undisguised surprise. ‘Dressing-room One. Down the—’

But Charles knew the geography of the theatre and strode along the corridor. He knocked on the door and it was thrown open by Bernard, oozing bonhomie from a silk dressing-gown. ‘Charles dear boy. Lovely to see you.’

Dear boy? Charles baulked slightly at that and then he realised that Bernard actually thought of himself as Nod Coward. The whole star bit. ‘Good to see you, Bernard. How’s it going?’

‘Oh, *comme çï, comme çã*. Audience love it. Doing fantastic business, in spite of all the crisis, whatever it’s called. So I can’t complain. I’m just opening a bottle of champagne if you . . .’

‘Do you have any Scotch?’

‘Sure. Help yourself. Cupboard over there.’

‘Bernard. I’ve come to ask you a favour.’ May as well leap straight in.

‘Certainly. What can I do for you?’

‘You know Marius Steen, don’t you?’

‘Yes, the old sod. He owns half this show. You know, if Marius Steen didn’t exist, it would be necessary to invent him.’

Aphorisms too, thought Charles. Noel Coward has a lot to answer for. Generations of actors without a modicum of the talent, have pounced on the mannerisms.

‘The thing is, I want an introduction to him.’ At that moment, the door burst open and Margaret Leslie sparkled into the room, her tiny frame cotton-woolled in a great sheepskin coat. ‘Maggie darling!’ Bernard enveloped her in his arms. ‘Darling, do you know Charles Paris? Charles, have you met Maggie?’

‘No, I haven’t actually, but I’ve admired your work for a long time.’ Charles could have kicked himself for the cliché. It was true, though. She was a brilliant actress and deserved her phenomenal success.

‘Charles Paris?’ she mused huskily. ‘Didn’t you write that awfully clever play *The Rate-payer*?’ Charles acknowledged it rather sheepishly. ‘Oh, I’m enchanted to meet you, Charles. I did it in real life once. Played Wanda.’

‘Glenda.’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘Charles was an incredible help to me at the beginning of my career,’ said Bernard with professional earnestness. ‘I would have got nowhere without him. But nowhere.’

Charles felt diminished by the compliment. He’d have preferred Bernard to say nothing rather than patronise him. It was the gratitude of the star on *This is Your Life* thanking the village schoolmaster who had first taken him to the theatre.

‘Charles was just asking me about Marius.’

‘Oh God,’ said Maggie dramatically and laughed.

This put Charles on the spot. He didn’t mind asking Bernard a favour on his own, but it was awkward with Maggie there.

‘You said you wanted an introduction?’ Bernard prompted.

Nothing for it. He’d have to go on. ‘Yes. I . . . er . . .’ he’d got the story prepared but it was difficult with an audience. ‘I’ve written a new play. Light comedy. Thought it might be Steen’s sort of thing.’

‘Oh, I see. And you want me to introduce you, so that you can try and sell it to him.’

‘Yes.’ Charles felt humiliated. He’d never have sunk to this if he was actually trying to sell one of his plays. But it was the only possible approach to Steen he could think of. ‘I hope you don’t mind me asking . . .’

‘No. Of course not. Old pals act. Happy to oblige.’ And Bernard was. He was the great star and he was an old friend, less successful, wanting to be helped out. Charles winced at the thought of what he was doing. ‘Is it urgent, dear boy?’

‘It is a bit. There’s an American agent nibbling.’

‘Ah.’ Bernard’s tone didn’t believe it. ‘Well, you leave it with me, old chum. Have I got your number?’

Charles wrote it down. Margaret Leslie, who was wandering restlessly round the room, picked up a script from a table. ‘Is this the new telly, Bernard?’

‘Yes, it’s awful. Not a laugh in it. I do get a bit sick of the way they keep sending me scripts to make funny. Here’s a new show—may not be much good—never mind, book Bernard Walton, he’ll get a few laughs out of it. I probably could, but I should get a bit of support from the script-writer. You ought to write something for me, Charles,’ he added charmingly.

‘Not really my style, Bernard.’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’

‘Bernard,’ Maggie hinted, ‘I think we ought to . . .’

‘Lord, yes. Is that the time? Charles, we’re going out to eat. Why not join us? Going to the Ivy Miles’ll be there, John and Prunella, and Richard, I expect. I’m sure they could make room for another.’

Charles refused politely. He couldn’t stomach an evening of bright show-biz back-chat. Outside the theatre he gulped great lungfuls of cold night air, but it didn’t cleanse him inside. He still felt sullied by what he’d had to do—to crawl to someone like Bernard Walton.

There was only one solution. He hailed a cab and went to the Montrose. If he couldn’t lose the feeling, perhaps he could deaden it.

A tremendous hammering at the door. Charles rolled out of bed and groped his way over to open it. One of the Swedish girls was standing there in a flowered nylon dressing-gown. Charles had time to register that she looked like a dinky toilet-roll cover before his head caught up with him. It felt as if it had been split in two by a cold chisel and someone was grinding the two halves together.

‘Telephone.’ The Swedish girl flounced off. Charles tried to make it down the stairs with his eyes closed to allay the pain. He felt for the receiver and held it gingerly to his ear. ‘Hello?’

‘Charles, I’ve done it!’ Bernard’s voice sounded insufferably cheerful. Charles grunted uncomprehending. ‘I’ve spoken to Marius.’

‘Ah.’

‘Well, I haven’t actually spoken to him, but I spoke to Joanne—that’s his secretary—and I’ve fixed for you to see him this afternoon at four. That’s if he’s back. Apparently he’s been down at Sreatle since the weekend, but Joanne says he should be back today. Got some charity dinner on.’

‘Look, Bernard, I . . . er . . .’ Charles’ smashed brain tried to put the words together. ‘Thanks very . . . I . . . er . . . don’t know how—’

‘Don’t mention it, dear boy.’ Bernard’s voice sounded as if it was opening a fete, big-hearted and patronising. ‘Do you know Marius’ office?’

‘No. I—’

‘Charing Cross Road. Milton Buildings. Just beyond the Garrick.’

‘Ah. Look, I . . .’

‘My dear fellow, not a word. I just hope it does you some good. Always glad to oblige. You helped me in the early days. Eh?’

If anything could have made Charles feel sicker, it was Bernard’s bonhomie.

By quarter to four the pain in his head had subsided to a dull ache. He found Milton Buildings on Charing Cross Road without too much difficulty, though the entrance was narrow, shuffled between a café and a book-shop.

Inside, however, the buildings were spacious. The board downstairs carried an impressive list of theatrical impresarios, agents and lawyers. ‘Marius Steen Productions’ was on the second floor. Charles travelled up in the old-fashioned cage lift. The envelope in his inside pocket seemed to bulge enormously. He felt as he had in Oxford, the first time he had taken a girl out with a packet of French letters in his wallet. He remembered the sense of an obscene lump under his blazer, revealing his intentions to the entire university. Didn’t know why he’d bothered. Virginal Vera, besotted with phonetics. Middle English and nothing else. The time that one wasted. He felt a twinge of embarrassment for the gaucheness of his youth.

‘ENQUIRIES’ and an arrow in gold leaf on the wall. It pointed to a panelled oak door. Charles

knocked. 'Come in.'

~~A secretary was sitting behind a solid Victorian desk. This must be Joanne. Unmarried, about forty~~ but not the standard over-made-up spinster secretary. She looked very positive and rather attractive in a forbidding way. Unmarried by choice, not default. She rose to meet him. 'You must be Mr Paris.'

'Yes.'

'I thought I recognised you from the television.'

'Ah!' There's no answer to that, but it's gratifying. 'Mr Paris, I'm so sorry. I would have tried to contact you, but I hadn't a phone number. I'm afraid Mr Steen hasn't come up from the country.'

'Oh dear.'

'Yes, I'm sorry. I thought he'd be back today. It appears that he's reading some scripts and . . .'

'Oh, that's all right.'

'There's no one else who could help? Mr Cawley deals with a lot of the management side.'

'No, I don't think so.'

'Or Mr Nigel Steen should be in town later. He'll certainly be here over the weekend.'

'Has he been down at Streatley?'

'He went down yesterday. Perhaps he could . . .?' 'No, no thanks, I wanted to see Mr Marius Steen personally.'

'Ah. Well, I'm sorry. I explained to Mr Walton that . . .'

'Yes. Don't worry.'

'Perhaps you could let me have your number and then I'll give you a call when Mr Steen is back in town and we could fix another appointment.'

'Yes.'

So that was it. Charles left the office with his pocketful of pornography, feeling flat. He wandered along the Charing Cross Road, trying to think what to do next, Galahad on hearing that someone else had found the Holy Grail, Knight Errant without an errand. He rang Jacqui from Leicester Square tube station and reported his lack of progress.

'You say he's in Streatley now?'

'Yes.'

'And Nigel's coming up to town?'

'Probably, but, Jacqui, don't try to contact him. Leave it to me. I'll get in touch with him after the weekend.'

'Yes . . .' Wistful.

'I'll sort it out, Jacqui.'

'Yes . . .' Drab.

Charles wandered aimlessly through Leicester Square to Piccadilly. A cartoon cinema was offering Tom and Jerry and Chaplin shorts. He hovered for a moment, but his mind was too full to be sidetracked. He had to find out more about Marius Steen. So he went down the steps to Piccadilly Underground station and bought a ticket for Tower Hill.

Speciality Act

THE OLD PEOPLE'S Home was designed for daylight. Plate glass welcomed the sun in to warm the inmates who sat in armchairs, waiting. But now it was dark. The nurse hadn't been round yet to close the curtains and Charles Paris and Harry Chiltern looked out on galvanised frames of blackness. The offices around were empty and dead, street lights in the backwater thought unnecessary in the emergency. The windows seemed more forbidding than walls.

'I saw some programme on the television the other day,' said Harry after a moment's musing. 'About the club comics it was. Just telling gags. Terrible. No technique. Or do I mean all the same techniques? I tell you, I've seen more variety in a tin of sardines.'

'They don't have variety now. Not even the word. Variety with a big V. Used to mean something. No, I rang a mate in the Variety department at the BBC. Couple of years back, this was. He said, it's not Variety any more, it's Light Entertainment. Light Entertainment—now that's a different thing altogether.'

'I mean, when Lennie and I done our act, we worked on it. Worked hard. A few gags, monologue—that was Lennie's bit—a few more gags, I'd do my drunk routine, and finish with a song and a bit of tap. I mean, rehearsed. Not just standing up there telling some joke you heard from a man in a pub. It was an act. People who come to see the Chiltern Brothers knew they'd get a real show. Get the money's worth. No, this television, I don't hold with it. Entertainment in your living-room. That's not the place for entertainment—it's for your knitting and your eating and your bit of slap and tickle. You gotta go out—that's part of the entertaining. Make a night of it, eh?'

'Yes. I suppose the television's on all the time here.'

'From the moment it starts. Some of the old biddies stuck in front all day long, watching—I don't know-how to speak Pakistani, or what kiddies can do with a cotton-reel. All bleeding day long. I tell you, there's one old cripple, ugly old bird—more chins than a Chinese telephone directory—sits there nodding away at the test-card when it's on, doesn't notice. Mind you, it's a lot more interesting than some of the programmes, eh?'

Harry Chiltern cackled with laughter and subsided into silence as the nurse at last arrived to draw the curtains. 'Evening, Mr Chiltern.'

'Evening.'

'I see we've got a visitor. Hello.' The nurse smiled conspiratorially at Charles. Harry contemplated his highly polished shoes until she had left the room. 'Silly old cow. Thinks we're all gaga. "I see we've got a visitor." Who's we, eh? Apart from Georgie Wood, eh?' He laughed again, then stopped suddenly. 'Come on.' He eased himself out of the chair.

'What?'

'She's off now, doing the other curtains. We can whip down to the Bricklayers for a pint.'

'Should you?'

'Bloody hell, Charles. If I'm going to snuff it, I'd rather snuff it with a pint in my fist than one of their bloody mugs of Ovaltine. Come on.'

The Bricklayers' Arms was one of those modem pubs that capture all the atmosphere of an airpo

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