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PAUL THEROUX

A DEED WITHOUT A NAME

We have known the Crowleys ever since we arrived in Singapore, and to be honest neither Harry nor I found it the least bit strange that they should ring us up in the middle of the night to tell us about that horrid ship disaster in the harbor. It was only later that Harry said he had had a few inklings all along, that it was ‘just like the Crowleys,’ but that from practically every point of view it was (as he put it) ‘very strange indeed,’ which I take to mean he agrees with me.

Both Les and Beth – or as I now think of them, Lester and Elizabeth – fancied themselves amateur detectives, better than the fictional ones. At first there was not a bit of this. He puffed his pipe and talked about meerschaum and dottle and Turkish mixtures; and she was frightfully women’s pagey, with black stockings and eye make-up and funny beads. He wore a medallion around his neck which embarrassed Harry, though he said he had been wearing it a lot longer than the youngsters these days, and she said the same about her get-up. I shall never know how they got away with it in London just after the war, a trying time for us all; they could have got away with it in Hampstead or Chelsea, I suppose, but certainly not in Sutton where they claimed they had a maisonette. The boring thing about people who dress in this odd way is that they do so to invite comment and challenge approval, like children in company saying to their parents ‘I hope you die.’ They made Harry’s life a misery simply because he always wore a cricketing tie, and Harry worked jolly hard as treasurer of the club. He earned that tie, but I’ll never know where they earned the right to dress like an up-dated incubus and succubus, who might be known to their friends as Inky and Sucky. And they always said my frocks were infra.

I was saying about the Crowleys and their detective stories. This subject came up one evening when I told her how thrilled I had been by The Mousetrap and had they seen it? She held a sip of sherry in her mouth and tasted it with a tight little smile. She swallowed; the smile was gone. ‘Did you hear that?’ she called to Lester. ‘Yes,’ he said, and getting terribly excited he turned to me and said, ‘I thought it was such a lot of –’

Do people have to talk that way?

Ellery Queen was going off, they said. And Poirot (‘with his mon doos and sacra bloos’) was already beyond the pale. ‘The only writer worth mentioning is Simenon in the original,’ she said, though ‘mon doo’ I shouldn’t think recommended her as much of a French scholar. As I look back on Elizabeth and her nastiness and her French novels I always suspect that her great pleasure must have been in cutting the pages with some ever-so-interesting Oriental dagger. ‘And Doyle at his best,’ said Lester, ‘and B — and

Gr—.’ (These last two names, which he mumbled, were unfamiliar to me: I am positive that is why he said them.)

‘You see, to have a proper murder story there has to be a real sense of sin,’ she said.

A sense of sin! Well, that’s the Crowleys all over. The Mousetrap, a diverting little gem by the mistress of the genre, didn’t have a sense of sin, was that it? I remember the evening Harry and I saw it; I can imagine how it would have been spoiled for us if the Crowleys had been in the next stall and got all shirty about this gripping play not having a sense of sin. And neither will I repeat the uncharitable, not to say the beastly things the Crowleys said about Dame Margaret Rutherford.

I hold no brief for detective stories. Usually I find them very gloomy and always I find them badly written. I suppose Harry and I defended Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle because the Crowleys were being such awful bores. I get no joy from murder, though I admit some do, but in the normal way I would not have lifted a finger to defend a writer of crime fiction, except from an onslaught of prigs. I would cheerfully defend anyone in the same way – it is my nature – unless it was another prig. Elizabeth, I hope you and Lester can hear me.

Their infatuation was with murder stories of quite a different stripe. I have already admitted that I did not catch the names of the writers Lester mentioned, but when people say, ‘Oh, you know who I mean – I’m sure you must have heard of him,’ you can be fairly certain they know you haven’t any idea who they mean. But I can well imagine what sort of stories the Crowleys liked. I had some indication of their tastes when they confessed that they too had thought of being murder-story writers. This is the chief characteristic of people who read rubbishy books; they take a shameless comfort in the fact that in a pinch they could quite easily duplicate them. Readers of murder stories are the biggest offenders here. I doubt that there is one of them who has not thought of setting pen to paper and dashing off a shilling shocker of his own. These aficionados of gore never actually write their stories, though they insist that with a typewriter and a bank holiday they would ‘type it up’ (writing, for them, being something like crocheting a doily) and it would be a best seller. Sheer bloody-mindedness prevents them from ever attempting it; they much prefer telling it, with pauses, putting finger to lips and saying um-um, holding a roomful of people captive with boredom. Lester and Elizabeth did this all the time, they were forever going on about their ‘own story,’ interrupting each other to add bloody minutiae and getting terribly excited about what were (to me, at any rate, and Harry) rather dreary little mysteries with obvious clues, intended only to shock. I have no doubt that there was a sense of sin in theirs!

But their infatuation was with murder stories of quite a different stripe. For Lester and Elizabeth, the crime was everything and solving it did not worry them for a moment; in fact, the crimes they concocted were seldom solved at all. Their theory, I suppose, was

that not all crimes are solved – that is, the best ones aren't. Their shockers took ages to tell and always had the servant in a terrible state (Ah Ho doesn't live in this compound and has to be driven home when the guests leave; Harry used to be furious and it always rained). A typical Crowley shocker was about a murder trial in which all the jury, the magistrate, the entire prosecution – everyone in the courtroom except the accused – was guilty of the crime. Of course the poor chap was found guilty and later gassed. (Was it that old gray-haired judge with a nose so big 'it seemed,' Lester put in, 'as if he was perpetually eating a banana' who dreamed up that mess? I forget.) Here the point was that the honest man has no business in society: society is evil and will kill him. For the Crowleys there was no such thing as a good sleuth and no one was innocent except the accused, no one guilty except the law; I think that was how it went, and there was an awful lot of torturing. Positively diabolical.

I do not mean to suggest that the Crowleys were cruel to us or hurt us in any way, or for that matter that they were not, underneath it all, decent people in many ways. Her soufflés and his imitation of a West Country rustic (I can still hear him saying, 'Ur, it bain't very furr …') did more than make up for their rather childish insistence on ticking off the writers of detective stories and their championing of the two I suppose infinitely more tiresome and bloodthirsty writers whose names were lost in the nimbus of Turkish tobacco smoke which hung between Lester's lips and my ear; I mean, B — and Gr—. Perhaps it was the amusing working-class accent which Lester adopted when speaking about very serious subjects. (The middle class often use such devices as a cover for their embarrassment.) And the Crowleys, for all their admitted kinks and quirks, had excellent taste in antiques, little ikons and altars, maps and occult charts which fascinated Harry, who has been looking into old atlases ever since he heard of their annual appreciation of 10 per cent – a good deal sounder than most British investments, which are a scandal. They had cute little black drapes fitted across Lester's 'meditation room' and inside very interesting snapshots of a bald and bug-eyed gentleman Lester said was his father. 'A beastly man, a beastly man,' Lester would say, and this for a reason I cannot guess at sent both Lester and Elizabeth into gales of laughter. They had such things as tiger skins and opium pipes, fascinating Oriental pots, and bric-à-brac imprinted with abracadabra. It was all, Lester said, his father's.

'Your father must have been quite a character,' I said to Lester on one occasion. Harry and Elizabeth were in another room sampling a sort of rice dumpling very popular here with the Chinese.

'Oh, he was,' said Lester, and with that he brushed his hand neatly across the curve of my bottom, so neatly that I could not accuse him of getting fresh, barely comprehending what he had done to me. I thought at the time that it was a skirt pleat freeing itself and touching me softly. I know better now. He never spoke again about his father, nor did I ask.

Our relationship, because it was not a relationship at all but rather an awareness of each other, had a forced heartiness about it and a bonhomie (how Elizabeth made a shambles of the pronunciation of this simple French word!) that was impossible to suppress. We were not good friends of the Crowleys' and never had been; this resulted in an uncertain distance which compelled us to do more for them than their best friends would have done, though God only knows who or where their best friends were. It is easier to say no to a friend than to one of these fumbling strangers; I much prefer the honesty of friendship, so does Harry. One is always doing something one finds unpleasantly intimate with someone one barely knows. It is always the way and it is the reason Harry and I make a point of 'screwing our courage to the sticking place,' so to speak, and getting to know people really well. As we have no children (Harry has a low 'count') this is usually quite simple. We tried with the Crowleys but it never worked: we were always the new visitors, obliging them with kindnesses and remembering not to interrupt or offend either of them, and often going out of our way for them, always an inconvenience. Harry is such a dreadful sleeper; I remember how they used to urge us to stay on and dope Harry with coffee. We could not say no. We only said no once to the Crowleys, and that was the last time we saw them, when our so-called friendship ended; and this happened shortly after the incident I intend to tell you about right now.

It was near midnight when they rang. I know that because Harry was soaking his teeth, and he never does that before midnight. It is a small but useful courtesy he has practiced throughout our marriage and I am grateful to him for it. It is my luck that I have been blessed with very strong teeth, and let me note here that Lester, although of Irish stock, had an unexpectedly fine set of teeth which he said were all his own. 'That,' I ribbed him, 'comes of a long residence in England. In Ireland they'd be rotted to stumps!' Lester did not, happily for me, take offense at my harpish dig.

They spoke of two separate items when they rang and they did this in a rather clever way. Lester spoke to Harry first and told him of the ship disaster in the harbor. Apparently a tanker approaching the harbor spied another tanker just leaving. They were in the deep channel, near the islands called the Sisters, that leads to Collyer Quay. The approaching tanker signaled the other (two short blasts) to turn off. But it was early morning and the captain who had signaled had the impression he had not been heard, and so shortly after gave two more strong blasts on his whistle, or whatever it is they signal with on tankers. Here destiny dealt another card. Two short blasts means 'turn to port' (left) but four short blasts means 'turn to starboard' (right). The second tanker turned to starboard, was rammed amidships and sank in seventeen minutes, just long enough for four wild Chinese to find life jackets and leap to safety. The rest perished, the Scots captain and thirty of the crew. As for the other tanker, the one that had done all the signaling and ramming; well, that tanker steamed out to sea and was last heard of in Japan where it discharged its entire crew, including its (Liberian) captain. It suffered a bit of damage in the bow (front). A tragic tale, and one worthy of a Humphrey Bogart film if not a Joseph Conrad novel.

Then Elizabeth spoke to me. Were we interested in getting up a swimming party? I said an emphatic yes. One is able to see a great deal of one another on a swimming trip; there is candid revelation in seminakedness. We fixed it for the following Sunday and I said I'd bring sandwiches and my own liver pâté if they could be responsible for fruit and drink (I hinted at a jug of simple orange squash so that they would not feel obligated to hump a crate of beer). I was beside myself when I rang off.

Harry was pale. He told me what Lester had said about the ship disaster and added, 'I fancy the poor blokes didn't have a chance.' Poor blokes, you see; it sounds frightfully low, and Harry's father was a bishop. But I have said somewhere above that the middle class often uses working-class language when the thought expressed is unbearably serious. Harry, you are forgiven for this. I understand.

Then I told Harry what Elizabeth had said to me about swimming. Harry said fine, 'as long as it isn't near the Sisters,' and he tried a charmless laugh.

The scene at the Jardine Steps where we booked our motor launch was so picturesque: sampans and fisherfolk here, smugglers in undervests there, mothers giving suck to their round-cheeked kids on the quayside, and over there a foursome of RAF hearties with goggles and flippers setting out for a day of snorkeling in the Straits! Much as I would like to linger here on the steps and allow a thorough consideration of the colorful comings and goings, I feel I must press on. Landscape is all very well, and there is much to say of the quaint splendor of these 'pampered jades of Asia,' but for my present purpose I am afraid it would only delay the telling of what is a far more important (to me, at any rate) if less pretty story.

Leaning against the gunwales (sides) of the launch as we putt-putted out into the harbor, I realized that we were not headed in the direction of Pulau Blakang Mati – where the bathing facilities are excellent and 'the water is like ginger beer' in the unambitious simile of one of the local poets – but for the Sisters. These two heaps of stones, topped with stunted cacti and patient pitcher plants, loomed up in the channel of swirling water. And behind them, the low blue blancmange of Indonesia.

The two druids sat inside, leafing through the Sunday papers and smiling to themselves. Harry, poor Harry, tried to strike up a conversation with the Chinese pilot. The unmuffled engine roared, Harry shouted, the pilot replied in clacking Cantonese. The pilot's small daughter had come along, though for no more sinister reason than the daughter of the Hesperus' captain: 'To bear him company.' She stared in an intensely embarrassing way at Harry, who does not know a word of Cantonese but talks a great deal when he is upset.

I put on a brave face. I was not going to let the Crowleys know they had succeeded in spoiling what could have been quite a pleasant swimming party. But though my

expression did not betray my alarm, I searched the water anxiously for the wreck of the tanker and thought at one point that just beneath the surface I saw the funnel (chimney) of the sunken ship. It turned out to be a rotten basket astir with seaweed.

The pilot communicated to us by means of clever wrist play and a series of little grunts that the tide was down and that he would have to drop anchor there while we swam ashore to the Sisters. This was agreed upon. There was no need for an elaborate change of clothes as we were wearing our bathing costumes under our street things. We folded our slacks and jumpers and dived into the channel and made for the shore, the Crowleys with morbid slowness, Harry and I thrashing desperately.

I felt the tug of the ripping tide on my arms, the slimy uprooted loofahs brushing my knees, and I thought with horror of the ghostly hulk which lay – who knew how close? The Crowleys probably did – beneath me, manned by the corpses of thirty Chinese and one valiant Scot. I have no idea how I made it to shore, but I did, and so did Harry. How ironic that the sun should beat down on us, that the sky should be so impossibly blue! A blasted heath would have been more appropriate, especially as in trendy bathing costumes the Crowleys crawled up the beach.

It was clear that both of them wished to raise the subject of the tanker, for they remarked on the rainbows of oil slick that slapped in the shallows. ‘Must be from our launch,’ said Harry, who is nobody’s fool and certainly knew better than that. They also spoke about the curious shadows in the water, and Lester said in that pompously knowledgeable way of his: ‘Modern science really hasn’t a clue what goes on under the sea.’

‘Another one of your detective stories?’ I remarked, and I could tell it wounded him because he visibly winced at me.

Seeing that they were getting nowhere, the Crowleys then began telling Harry and I of something that had happened to them in I think Panama. The story does not bear repeating; it is too horrible for that. But simply let me say that it was about a stray dog they picked up, thinking it was a worthy little animal. They fed it and cared for it; it loved them and appeared perfectly docile. After a month or two of care its coat was glossy and it showed tenderness, fetching sticks and wagging its tail. The family next door, imitating the Crowleys’ example, bought a small puppy at a pet shop in the city. On seeing the puppy, the Crowleys’ hound leaped the hedge that divided the gardens and set upon the poor animal and tore it to pieces. It turned out that the dog the Crowleys had befriended was a ‘fighting dog’ which is trained from birth to kill other dogs, but is in all other respects quite normal. Apparently your Panamanian enjoys such sport and makes bets on these dogfights in the same way as other savages gamble on fighting cocks. I have told more of this story than I had planned to. I don’t have to say it chilled me to the bone. And Lester had the impertinence to add, ‘You see, there’s a lesson in that.’

The only lesson I could see was that one should be careful in choosing one's friends, and I as much as told him so.

We lunched on the launch. Another frantic swim. They remarked politely on my cucumber sandwiches ('frail but cooling') and ate all the pâté. Harry, who will let himself be bullied, had their leavings. I made up for their gluttony by having more than my share of wine (they did after all bring a few bottles of a very acid Australian red). Harry, sampling the wine, remarked, 'It's a sincere little chappie' – very much to the point, I thought. And then we dozed, eyed by the Chinese father and daughter from the stern (back).

Around three I suggested returning home, saying that the sun had given me a rather splitting headache and didn't they think enough was enough? They insisted on another swim; Harry refused to stand by me, he let himself be chivvied by them once again. We remained on board while the Crowleys floated on their backs and spat infantile little waterspouts into the air. 'Thar she blows!' said Harry, but he ceased this when he detected an expression of severe reprimand on my face. It was at this point that, gazing off the side of the launch, I noticed a long and bejewelled snake slithering through the water, making its way amongst the rocks and coral. I did not call attention to it; even Harry was unaware of its existence (yes, dear). They are said to be quite poisonous and I thought then as I think now, that death can end an unsatisfying relationship as soon as rudeness, and I don't mind saying that I was hoping with all my heart that one or both of the Crowleys would sustain the fatal bite of that snake. It was not to be. Laughing absurdly they clambered into the launch and gave the pilot instructions for the voyage home.

Instead of taking the direct route back, we made what I thought was a pointless detour around St John's Island, where the mental hospital is. It is also, at the south shore, the place where the channel meets the open sea, and consequently there is a terrific choppiness in the water. I was absolutely disgusted and decided to sun myself on the roof of the launch; but the pounding of the waves across the rocking bow of the launch was too much for me, and I realized that it was the express intention of the Crowleys to drown Harry and me, as they had signally failed to cow or frighten us. The sea hit and broke, hit and broke, setting the launch into an indescribable pitching, and tossing up bundles of lathered flotsam onto the foredeck.

And here, just south of that island madhouse, in the frothy sea, I looked up and saw that very strange thing. I peered at it for a long moment.

'Look at that,' said Harry, who had also seen it. 'Is it a lobster trap?'

Neither of the Crowleys spoke, though they watched it intently. On the cabin bench the small Chinese girl was peacefully, mercifully asleep.

It bobbed toward us, bloated to a grotesque buoyancy, very high in the water, rigid in the attitude of a resting swimmer.

‘A sack of meal,’ said Harry.

We all watched it pass twenty yards off. It had limbs, but the hands were out of the water, and black, and clawing the air. It was much worse than seeing a corpse far off and deliberately averting your eyes. We did not take our eyes off it for a second! We pretended it wasn’t human! Then it was too late: we knew we had been staring at a dead man for ten minutes or more.

The Chinese boatman threw his head back and laughed, for a corpse is considered unlucky, and it is by laughing hysterically that your Chinese reacts to mortal terror.

‘You can’t fool me,’ I said. ‘I know it’s dead.’

‘No one is trying to fool you,’ said Lester. ‘But look – it’s spinning so grandly.’

The corpse wheeled around and around, like an inflated beach toy in a breeze.

‘It is floating rather well,’ said Elizabeth, and she smiled: the lewd satisfaction of the torturer.

I closed my eyes and instantly wanted to kill them both. With my eyes shut I heard Harry say, ‘Quite possibly a fugitive bale of jute.’

Poor Harry. That was no bale of jute. You knew what it was. But why didn’t you say so then? Why did you wait until after we had paid the boatman and were home to agree with me? Don’t you see that we could have confronted those two hellhounds with their beastliness? And why, whenever I bring this matter up, do you simply say that ‘we learned our lesson’?

As for me, I was brusque with the Crowleys. I remembered not to say cheerio but snapped a sharp good-bye into their faces. Harry will go on denying this, but I know pretty well what those arch bitches were up to, though I have not yet discovered the name for their deed, and without this word I cannot make a coherent accusation. Harry keeps muttering that some people are intentionally devilish while others are plain crazy, and these days you don’t know who to trust. This, as Harry knows perfectly well, explains nothing whatsoever. Now he refuses to discuss the matter and has talked repeatedly of leaving Singapore and taking me ‘for a long rest somewhere cool.’ If I do not know the name of what they did to us it is not because there is none. It is only a matter of time, and I have assured Harry that when I find out what it is I shall report all the findings which I have carefully noted here to the proper authorities.