



Farewell My Herring

L. C. TYLER

Allison & Busby Limited
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CHAPTER ONE

Ethelred

‘If I were to kill you somewhere like this,’ said the taxi driver cheerfully, ‘it would be months before they found the bits the buzzards didn’t want. Every time I drop a passenger off round here, I think: now, there’s a good place for a quiet murder.’

I nodded. Much the same thought had already occurred to me. During our drive up from the station, the valley had progressively narrowed and coarsened. Broad, orderly fields of winter wheat had given way to rough sheep pasture, then sheep pasture to dead bracken and wind-smashed reeds that even the sheep didn’t consider to be food. The bare limestone crags and the fan-shaped sheets of scree had a strangely industrial air, but were as natural here, and as grim, as the sky above – a billowing grey-black that presaged snow, though a few incongruous patches of bright blue still gleamed through.

‘No phone signal, of course,’ he continued, turning suddenly and heart-stoppingly from his view of the road to address me. ‘Not after Butterthwaite. Even if you were certain I was going to bump you off, you’d have no way of letting anyone know. Not even a final, desperate text to the family. Perfect crime, eh?’

‘Butterthwaite? Where’s that?’ I asked. My gaze was fixed on the road ahead – a single-track thread of dark tarmac with passing places at scarcely adequate intervals. The drystone walls, which had lined the road most of the way up, were no longer there for us to hit, but the steep and unguarded slope down to the stream on our left spoke of even better opportunities for premature death.

‘Three mile back,’ he said. He looked ahead again, perhaps curious to see how far we had come. ‘It was the last village we passed through, if you want to call it a village. School closed in 1911. Pub in 1963. They finally finished vandalising the telephone box in 1980. Just the farm and a row of holiday cottages now. The farm sells ice cream and cans of drink in the summer. That’s all it is. Walkers don’t come up this way much. That’s peat bog down there by the beck, that is. Never dries out in the summer and never seems to freeze in the winter. You’d be up to your knees in it if you went more than half a dozen yards. A man vanished without trace, a year or two back. His wife said he’d fallen behind as they both came down from the fells – he stopped to look at some peregrine falcons, she said. She was never that interested in raptors herself. Anyway, she just pressed on down to the main road and waited for him there. Eventually she caught the bus into Harrogate and had a cream tea at Betty’s. Plenty of people saw her there,

but they never did find out what happened to the husband. The jury believed her story though. Or, like as not, they just thought he deserved it.'

'They often do,' said Elsie. She had taken the front passenger seat, though she had no need at all of the additional leg room it afforded, leaving me to fold myself into the back of the taxi as best I could, with her hard suitcase on the shiny, red fake-leather beside me. It bounced sharply into my thigh whenever we hit a bump.

'As for Fell Hall at the top of the valley,' said the driver, now speaking to me via the rear-view mirror, 'well, nobody had lived in that for years and years until the Golden Age Trust took it over to run these writing courses.'

'I suppose it's called Fell Hall because it is right up in the fells?' Elsie asked.

'No, it's named after Dr Gideon Fell. A detective. Apparently this chap, John Dickson Carr, wrote about him. Crime writer, you see. All their courses are crime writing up there. You'll be crime writers yourselves if you're going up to the hall today? I usually take the tutors up on Wednesday evening, then the students start to arrive on the Thursday morning, so I'm guessing you're both writers.'

'Do I look like a crime writer?' asked Elsie pointedly.

'Yes,' said the driver, who was hopefully not expecting a tip from her.

'*He's* a writer,' she said, jerking a plump thumb back in my direction. 'That's what writers look like. If they're not careful. I'm his agent. And, fortunately, also the agent of a number of other writers, or I wouldn't be able to afford the fare up here.'

He nodded. That was an important consideration.

‘So, would I have heard of you, sir?’ he asked me.

‘Probably not,’ said Elsie.

‘He might have,’ I said.

‘I’m sure he only reads bestsellers,’ said Elsie. ‘Most sensible people do.’

‘No. I read all sorts of stuff,’ the taxi driver replied. ‘I get them from charity shops mainly. Books people don’t want to keep, like.’

Elsie shrugged. It was then perfectly possible that he knew me well.

‘What name do you write under?’ he asked.

‘Various names, but mainly as Peter Fielding,’ I said.

‘Come again?’

I repeated the name.

‘Who else?’ he asked.

‘J. R. Elliot?’

‘Thrillers?’

‘Historical mysteries. Reign of Richard the Second. The detective is called Master Thomas. He’s one of Chaucer’s clerks.’

‘Chaucer, eh? Sounds a bit too clever for me. Who else?’

‘Amanda Collins?’ I said.

‘Yes – definitely. Amanda Collins. I’m sure I’ve read some of them. Police procedurals, aren’t they? Set in Worthing? Really gruesome murders?’

‘No, they’re romantic comedies. No murders of any sort. I do those occasionally too.’

‘Not any more,’ said Elsie. ‘Your publisher’s dropped you.’

‘You didn’t tell me that.’

‘I was waiting for the right moment.’

The last small trace of blue sky had vanished. Mist was ominously rolling down the valley, or perhaps we were climbing up into the clouds. It was difficult to say. The driver crunched a gear change. He swore, switched the windscreen wipers on and peered with narrowed eyes at the road that rose in a long, sinuous curve, following the line of the valley. Large flakes of snow had started to fall. Down amongst the winter wheat, it was late for snow, but not up here. Up here, you felt, it would never be too late.

‘So, you teach them how to write crime novels, then?’ he asked me. ‘How to create red herrings, and so on?’

‘The course is for writers of traditional mysteries,’ said Elsie. ‘So, yes, it’s really all about herrings. Misdirecting the reader is the most important tool in their box. That and locked rooms. And railway timetables. Oh, and these days you’re also allowed at least one cynical, hungover detective fighting their own personal inner demons as they track down yet another serial killer.’

‘I bet there’s a bit more to it than that, though?’ he said. ‘Am I right?’

‘Absolutely,’ said Elsie. ‘You have to get somebody – somebody with a knowledge of the real world – to sell the book to a publisher – not an easy task, because publishers have been sold duds before and are now less and less trusting of the assurances of decent, honest agents. They want to check actual sales records these days, which can be inconvenient. Then you have to come up with a better title than the author’s one and design a really good cover with a blurb on the back that describes a book that somebody might actually want to read rather than the one

the author wrote. Once the hard work's done, you add the author's eighty thousand words, minus the clichés, repetition, contradictions, dull bits, split infinitives and non sequiturs, and – if there are still any words left – you've got a book.'

'She's joking,' I explained.

'Ah,' he said. 'Is she now?'

'That's Fell Hall over there?' asked Elsie.

The driver nodded and changed gear again. The road had finally ceased to climb, but the tarmac had given out as we passed between some massive stone gateposts, and we bumped the last few hundred yards over a rocky track that merged imperceptibly, in every direction, into the broad, misty moorland.

Ahead of us, an irregular black outline pierced by narrow, dimly lit windows could now be discerned through the enveloping septentrional gloom. Slowly the character of our destination became clearer – the slick slate roof, the rough-hewn stone walls, the randomly placed gables, the motley collection of outbuildings. Only the practised eye could have told which bits were medieval and which had been added in the nineteenth century by somebody with a morbid imagination; but it was clear that it had grown cautiously over the years, like the stunted trees we had passed on the road, keeping its own counsel but missing nothing that went on around it.

'I think you've made it just in time,' the driver said. 'Another hour and there'll be a couple inches of snow. Not good on these gradients – or not with my tyres, anyway. Do you want a hand with that suitcase, love?'

‘No,’ said Elsie, who knew that she didn’t have to tip me, however large and heavy the bag. ‘Ethelred will carry it. Under one *nom de plume* or another.’

‘I’ll do it as Amanda Collins, shall I?’ I said.

‘She doesn’t have anything else to do, poor cow,’ said Elsie.

CHAPTER TWO

Ethelred

‘You must be Elsie Thirkettle,’ said the course director, shaking her hand. ‘I’m Wendy Idsworth.’ She checked a list on her clipboard. ‘And you are Peter Fielding?’

Wendy’s voice was southern, middle class. Though I’d been only a couple of hours up here in the North, it already sounded incongruous, foreign, affected, though it was much as I spoke myself.

‘It’s one of the names I write under,’ I said. ‘My real name is Ethelred. Ethelred Tressider.’

‘Really?’ She raised her eyebrows.

‘After King Ethelred the First – not Ethelred the Unready. My father was always very clear on that point. It was an important distinction for him, and he could never quite understand why it wasn’t one for other people.’

She nodded. She was definitely with other people on that.

‘So, would you like us to call you Peter or Ethelred?’ she enquired.

I paused for a moment too long.

‘Call him Ethelred,’ said Elsie. ‘Peter makes him sound almost normal.’

Wendy mouthed all three Anglo-Saxon syllables of ‘Ethelred’ as she amended the list of tutors on her clipboard. That was that, then. I was not to escape being Ethelred, not even for the weekend. She tapped the metal clip with her pen and nodded again.

She was a short, thin woman with dark hair. Her face seemed prematurely wrinkled, as do the faces of many who spend a lot of their time out on the fells. Wendy was resident director – she remained summer and winter, organising courses, overseeing repairs to the ancient structure of Fell Hall, walking the trails whenever the opportunity arose. She must have sat out many lonely, snowy nights and days. But apparently she enjoyed her solitude. She was in fact something of a legend in the writing world, though a rarely seen one. I’d run into her once in Harrogate, when she’d visited the crime writing festival for a day, but she’d been back up in the fells before most of us hit the bar, which was pretty early. The fliers advertising the Fell Hall courses were written by her, but never featured her photograph, not even in the background of some cheerful group of writers and would-be writers. It was as if she were the ghost in the machine of the Golden Age Trust, to which she was wholly devoted.

‘You’re in Ripon,’ she said, passing me two keys. ‘Ripon’s a small single room but quite adequate for a short stay. The second key is for the front door if you need it, though I imagine you won’t be going out much after dark in this weather. Elsie, we’ve put you in the Malham Suite, as you requested. I think you’ll find it very comfortable indeed. The

various settings for the bath are quite complicated, but there is a manual in the bathroom, next to the towel heater. Both rooms are up on the first floor – Ripon’s some way beyond Malham, at the very end of the corridor. Try stuffing a flannel or something in the gap in the window, Ethelred, if it gets too cold for you. Are you both OK with your bags?’

‘Ethelred can manage everything,’ said Elsie. ‘We’ll be fine.’

Wendy noticed a presence hovering at her shoulder. A large young woman with a ruddy face and untidy blonde hair. ‘Yes, Jenny?’ she said.

‘I’ve put the two girls in Giggleswick,’ Jenny reported. She wiped her hands on her apron – a reflex action indicating a completed task, unless the girls had been particularly wet. ‘I’ve also prepped the veg and the pie’s done and ready to go in the oven whenever you like. If that’s all, I’ll go back down in the next taxi.’

Wendy shook her head. ‘All of the tutors are now here. Unless there is another wholly unauthorised arrival of participants, there’s no way of getting back into town tonight. I can’t drive you; I’m needed at the Hall. And obviously there’s no way of phoning for a taxi.’

‘But you promised . . . my mum’s birthday.’

‘I need you here tomorrow, Jenny, bright and early.’

‘My car might be fixed by tomorrow. If it’s not, I could have got a lift from Dad, first thing in the morning. He wouldn’t have minded a break from the farm.’

‘The road may be blocked with snow by then.’

‘In that case nobody will get here and there’s no course to run. You wouldn’t need me.’

‘Don’t be pert, Jenny. I’ve warned you about that before. There are no more taxis coming up and no way of getting

one for you – even if a driver was prepared to come up here so late and in the snow.’

‘But I told you—’

‘You did tell me, but I don’t believe I promised anything.’

‘With no phone reception up here, I can’t even call Mum to wish her happy birthday.’

‘I don’t have time for this now, Jenny. Just scamper along to the kitchen, there’s a good girl. That pie won’t put itself in the oven, will it? I’ll join you as soon as I can.’

Jenny looked at Wendy as if she could happily murder her, but just said ‘I’ll get on with dinner then, shall I?’

‘Thank you, Jenny. That would be very kind. I’ll come and check what you’re doing in a moment.’ She turned to us. ‘Everyone will muck in tomorrow when all of the participants are here, but the first evening, with just the tutors, we cook for you.’

‘Did Jenny say the participants had started to arrive though?’ I asked.

Wendy rolled her eyes theatrically. ‘Yes, two of them. Claimed they’d got the wrong start time. I’ve put them together in the smallest double. I suppose they’ll have to join us for dinner. We can’t actually let them starve to death, can we?’

‘Starve to death?’ I said. ‘Definitely not. They should join us.’

Wendy looked disappointed at my wimpish response. You could always get more participants. There was usually a waiting list for each course.

‘They’ll be in the way when we’re discussing the programme tonight. That’s the whole point of the tutors arriving ahead of the participants. To finalise what you will

all do, without any distractions. I suppose we can send the girls to bed early. I have some decent whisky I was planning to open later – for the tutors, not the participants. And I’ve told them firmly to stay out of the way until it’s time to eat. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go and see what sort of mess Jenny is getting into on her own.’

‘I’m glad I don’t work for her,’ I said, once she had gone.

‘I’d employ her though,’ said Elsie. ‘She won’t let unimportant things like people or common decency stop her meeting her targets.’

‘Efficient,’ I said.

‘An administrative legend,’ said Elsie. ‘The goddess of timetabling and booking systems.’

‘She’s been director since the centre opened,’ I said.

‘Indeed. Appointed by the founder of the trust.’

‘Who is or was a fan of John Dickson Carr? The name of the trust and the hall are a bit of a give-away.’

‘To be honest nobody knows a lot about the founder. He’s an American called Hiram Shuttleworth. He was in finance apparently, and he’d traced his family roots back to this part of the world. He decided to use a few millions of his accumulated wealth to buy High End Hall, as it was called then, renovate it and turn it into a study centre for teaching and for research into crime fiction written during the Golden Age of the 1920s and ’30s, including but not limited to the Anglo-American John Dickson Carr. The post was never advertised, much to the annoyance of several writers with a love of both classic crime fiction and the great outdoors. Wendy was just given it. But not many people would have stuck it up here with the wind and the rain and the snow. If you didn’t love it, no money

on earth would make it worthwhile. She wasn't such a bad choice. They say that she's never taken a whole day off since she arrived here.'

'That would be contrary to the Working Time Directive,' I said.

'Not on this side of Butterthwaite, apparently.'

'She's a writer herself?' I asked.

'Publishing background, did somebody say? Editing? Another John Dickson Carr fan certainly – I've heard her lecture on him. She's not a bundle of laughs but she's thorough.'

'You've met her before then?'

'Once. You don't get to see her much unless you come up here.'

'Did you ever hear the rumour she used to be a spy – that she still is one?' I asked.

'Everyone's heard that one. CIA, somebody told me.'

'But you don't believe it?'

'Even the grimmest of CIA operatives occasionally allow themselves to break into a half-smile.'

'Good point,' I said. 'I'll drop your bag off on my way to my room, shall I?'