The Herring Seller's Apprentice

L. C. TYLER

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POSTSCRIPT

You'll have found the same thing yourself, of course. Just when you think you have committed the perfect crime, things most unfairly take a turn for the worse.

The phone had rung in an ominous tone, breaking the small-hours silence for me and most of West Sussex. I had picked up the receiver quickly and listened for a few moments to a familiar voice trying to do irony at one o'clock in the morning – something that is as difficult as it is pointless. This was, however, only a clumsy precursor to the real purpose of the call. 'You've finally slipped up. I know exactly what your game is, you pillock.'

'I doubt that,' I said. I was quite calm. I may possibly have yawned. But I was definitely calm.

'I know who you're off to meet.'

'Do you?' I asked. 'I bet you don't.'

'You bet I do. The only thing I don't quite understand is

how you've got away with as much as you have.'

'Unmerited good fortune,' I replied. 'And the fact that I'm a writer of detective stories. That, I suspect, played a large part in it.'

There was a snort of derision from the far end of the phone line, a snort as yet unjustified, because, the more I thought about it, the more certain I was that I could turn this to my advantage.

And however many evasions and half-truths there had been over the preceding months – those long months between my return from France and this unnecessary midnight phone call – I had just spoken one unquestionable truth. I *was* a writer.

Of that at least there could be no doubt.

CHAPTER ONE

I have always been a writer.

I wrote my first novel at the age of six. It was seven and a half pages long and concerned a penguin, who happened to have the same name as me, and a lady hedgehog, who happened to have the same name as my schoolteacher. After overcoming some minor difficulties and misunderstandings they became firm friends and lived happily ever after; but their relationship was, understandably, entirely platonic. At the age I was then, hedgehog-meets-penguin struck me as a plot with greater possibilities than boy-meets-girl.

Little has changed. Today I am three writers and none of us seems to be able to write about sex.

Perhaps for that reason, none of us is especially successful. Together, we just about make a living, but we do not appear on the bestseller lists in the *Sunday Times*. We do not give readings at Hay-on-Wye. The British Council does not ask us to undertake tours of sub-Saharan Africa

or to be writer-in-residence at Odense University. We do not win the Costa Prize for anything.

I am not sure that I like any of me but, of the three choices available, I have always been most comfortable being Peter Fielding. Peter Fielding writes crime novels featuring the redoubtable Sergeant Fairfax of the Buckfordshire Police. Fairfax is in late middle age and much embittered by his lack of promotion and by my inability to write him sex of any kind. When I first invented him, sixteen years ago, he was fifty-eight and about to be prematurely retired. He is now fifty-eight and a half and has solved twelve almost impossible cases in the intervening six months. He is probably quite justified in believing that he has been unfairly passed over. Under the pen-name of J. R. Elliot I also write historical crime novels. I am not sure of J. R. Elliot's gender, but increasingly I think that I may be female. The books are all set in the reign of Richard II because I can no longer be bothered to research any other period. It is a well-established fact that nobody had sex between 1377 and 1399.

As Amanda Collins I produce an easily readable 150 pages of romantic fiction every eight months or so, to a set style and a set formula provided by the publisher. Miss Collins is popular with ladies of limited imagination and little experience of the real world. A short study of the genre had already revealed to me that doctors were the heroes of much romantic fiction – usually they were GPs or heart surgeons. I decided to choose the relatively obscure specialty of oral and maxillofacial surgery for mine. Oral and maxillofacial surgeons have a great deal of

sex, occasionally with their own wives. But they do so very discreetly. My ladies prefer it that way, and so do I.

The three of us share an agent: Ms Elsie Thirkettle. She is the only person I have ever met, under the age of seventy, named Elsie. I once asked her, in view of the unfashionableness of her first name, and the fact that she clearly has no great love of it, why she didn't use her second name.

She looked at me as if I were an idiot boy that she had been tricked into babysitting by unkind neighbours. 'Do I look like a sodding Yvette?'

'But why did your parents call you Elsie, Elsie?'

'They never did like me. Tossers, the pair of them.'

My parents did not like me either. They called me Ethelred. My father's assurance that I was named after King Ethelred I (866–871) and not Ethelred the Unready (978–1016) was little consolation to a seven-year-old whose friends all called him 'Ethel'. I experimented with introducing myself as 'Red' for a while, but for some reason it never did catch on amongst my acquaintances. Oh, and my second name is Hengist, in case you were about to ask. Ethelred Hengist Tressider. It has never surprised anyone that I might prefer to be known as Amanda Collins.

It is possible that all agents despise authors, in the same way that school bursars despise headmasters, head waiters despise diners, chefs despise head waiters and shop assistants despise shoppers. Few agents despise authors quite so openly as Elsie, however.

'Authors? Couldn't fart without an agent to remind them where their arses are.'

I rarely try to contradict remarks of this sort. Based on Elsie's other clients, this is fair comment. Many of them probably could not fart even given this thoughtful assistance.

Elsie does in fact represent quite a number of other authors as well as the three of me. Occasionally we ask each other why we have settled for this loud, plump, eccentrically dressed little woman, who claims to enjoy neither the company of writers nor literature of any kind. Has she deliberately gathered together a group of particularly weak-willed individuals who lack the spirit either to answer her back or to leave her? Or do we all secretly enjoy having our work and our characters abused? Neither answer is convincing. The real reason is painful but quite clear: none of us is terribly good and Elsie is very successful at selling our manuscripts. She is also very honest in her criticism of our work.

'It's crap.'

'Would you like to be more specific?'

'It's dog's crap.'

'I see.' I fingered the manuscript on the table between us. Just the first draft of the first few chapters, but I had rather hoped that it would be universally hailed as a masterpiece.

'Leave the literary crime novel to Barbara sodding Vine. You can't do it. She can. Or, to put it another way, she can, you can't. Is that specific enough for you or would you like me to embroider it for you on a tea cosy in cross stitch?'

'I've put a lot of work into this manuscript already.'

'Not so that you'd notice, you haven't,' said Elsie kindly.

'But I've just spent three weeks in France researching the damned thing.'

'It won't be wasted. Send Fairfax to France. He deserves a break, poor bugger. Is France the place for him, though? He doesn't seem to have any interests beyond police work, Norman fonts and local history.'

'He's a crack addict, a drag artiste and he played for Germany in the '66 World Cup. My gentle readers suspect nothing as yet, but it's all in the next book.'

'It had better not be. Your gentle readers take that loser Fairfax very seriously and do not appreciate irony in any form. Sergeant Fairfax is your bread and butter, and twelve-and-a-half per cent of your bread and butter is my bread and butter. If Fairfax starts hankering after fishnet tights, send him round to me and I'll sort him out.'

This also was true. Elsie would sort him out. I once tried to give Fairfax an interest in Berlioz (I must have been reading too much Colin Dexter). Elsie had the blue pencil through that before you could say 'Morse'.

'Don't bother to develop his character,' she said. 'Your readers aren't interested in character. Your readers aren't interested in atmosphere. Your readers aren't interested in clever literary allusions. As for allegory, they won't know whether to fry it in butter or rub it on their piles. They just want to guess who did it before they get to the last page. And don't give them more than ten suspects, or they'll have to take their shoes off to count them.' Perhaps I should have said that if there's one thing that Elsie despises more than her authors, it is anyone foolish enough to buy our work. But again, I would hesitate to contradict her.

To tell the truth, I rarely try to contradict Elsie on anything these days. That was why, sitting in my flat that evening, all those months ago, I knew that the first draft would remain for ever just that. But it was worth one more try.

'You could take the manuscript back to London with you,' I suggested, 'and read it properly.'

'The problem,' she said tartly, 'does not lie with my reading, and my wastepaper bin in London is already quite full enough, thank you. Do you know how many crap first novels there are out there?'

'No,' I said meekly, not having counted them.

'Too many,' said Elsie, not having counted either, but with a great deal more confidence in her opinions. 'Now, how was France?'

I sighed. 'Totally redundant from a literary point of view, apparently, but otherwise very pleasant. I stayed in a charming little hotel. I sat by the Loire and drank the local wine – Chinon mainly, but sometimes Bourgueil. I absorbed a great deal of extremely authentic atmosphere. The sun shone and the birds sang. I met nobody who had ever read one of my books. Bliss.'

'Useful research.'

I sensed the irony in her voice – not a difficult achievement, since Elsie and subtlety are not even casual acquaintances. 'My characters were going to spend a considerable amount of their time sitting by the Loire drinking wine,' I said. 'I pride myself on accuracy. I had to research it in depth.'

'Bollocks. Did you have sex with anyone?'

'No.'

'I thought the French shagged anything that moved.'

'Not in Châteauneuf-sur-Loire. Possibly all manner of depravities were practised in Plessis-les-Tours or Amboise, but I never went to either.'

'Well then, next time, try Amboise. Hang loose. Get laid. Write it up in your next book.'

'Not *my* next book. As you well know, I don't do sex. And, though I cannot be absolutely certain in this matter, I don't believe that I have ever hung loose.'

'Is that why your wife left you?'

'My ex-wife,' I said. 'To be pedantically accurate, my ex-wife. Geraldine and I were incompatible in a number of respects.'

'The main way in which you were incompatible is that she was screwing your best mate.'

'Ex-best mate,' I said. 'He is my *ex*-best mate.'

'Then the cow walked out on you.'

'You make it sound rather abrupt and uncaring. She stayed long enough to write me a very touching note.'

'All right, she's a literate cow,' Elsie conceded generously. She's a fair woman in some ways, though not many. 'Is she still with the chinless wonder?'

'Rupert? No, she left him a while ago.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'You seem better informed than you should be, Tressider. Don't tell me you're still in touch with the old slag?'

'I must have just heard it from somebody. Why should you think I'm still in contact with her?'

'Because you're a prat, that's why. I'd like to think that

you were too sensible to go within a hundred miles of her. Normal people in your position – not that I know many normal people in my line of work, of course – sever all ties with their ex. Making a wax effigy and sticking pins in it is also said to be good. I could get you some wax if you like. There's this Nigerian bloke down the market. He does pins too.'

'I think that it's quite possible to be friends with a former spouse,' I said. 'Geraldine and I must have had something in common, after all. We had a number of happy years together, though admittedly she was simultaneously having a number of happy years with somebody else. Life's too short to be bitter over these things.'

'OK, Ethelred, stop just there, before I sick up. You've just never learnt to hate properly, that's your problem. Stop being nice and start wishing she was rotting in hell. Clearly I'm not saying that you should have to do it single-handed. Geraldine had a very special and remarkable talent for making enemies, and there'll be lots of others wishing hard along with you for her early, and preferably messy, demise. But frankly, if she ever turns up murdered, just remember that it is your absolute right to be considered the prime suspect.'

'But that's hardly likely to happen,' I pointed out. The doorbell rang.

It was a policeman.

He smiled apologetically.

'I have some bad news, sir,' he said. 'It's about your wife. May I come in?'