



The Maltese Herring

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Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2019.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2445-1

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon LT Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

CHAPTER ONE

Ethelred

Dr Hilary Joyner was still alive only because God did not always answer the prayers of his colleagues, however fervent and frequently uttered.

There was, however, little about Dr Joyner to suggest he cared much for his colleagues or their prayers. Early in his academic career, he had successfully cultivated a look of amused contempt – originally ironic and occasional, but now permanent and largely discounted. His dinner jacket was a monument to the many evenings that would have been more enjoyable without him. It bore a number of very visible stains, some much fresher than others. On this particular evening, he had clearly been distracted while tying his bow tie, which was neither symmetrical nor secure. And there was also something about him – it was difficult to say precisely what – that suggested he had run out of deodorant.

For the first half of the meal, he said nothing to me at

all, and I was obliged to converse with the deaf old lady that they had placed on the other side of me. She was the wife of some Fellow of the College, long dead, out of respect for whom she was invited back to dinner whenever the Principal remembered. They always sat her, she said, at High Table but next to the least distinguished of the other guests. If the person beside her was more than usually boring, she added, she would show them pictures of her grandchildren. She paused, then glanced downwards, as if looking for her handbag.

To be honest, I shared her view that photographs of a family that I had never met would enliven my evening. And, like her, I wasn't sure why I had been placed in this position of eminence, seated in one of the comfortable chairs on the raised dais, a highly significant foot or so above the rest of the dining hall. My natural place at this reunion of alumni was at one of the long, improbably shiny oak tables that ran the length of the room, whose hard benches were occupied in term time by the undergraduates and tonight by the majority of the grey-haired, balding former students. But somebody had decided that I should join High Table with, amongst others, the College Principal, a junior government minister, a moderately well-known actor and the College's only Nobel Prize winner. I did not need to be told that I was the least distinguished of the diners seated there. That would have been apparent to everyone in the room. Many would have been wondering, as they awkwardly shifted their middle-aged weight on the unpadded surface of their allotted bench, why I rather than they had been so honoured.

I turned from the deaf lady to Dr Joyner, but he was still delivering a monologue to his other neighbour, leaving me to contemplate the hall, which I knew so well from my student days. I'd forgotten how gloomy it was.

It is seldom that I return to dine at my old College without my thoughts turning to death. It is not the coffin-dark panelling. Nor is it the faces of former Principals, staring down, gowned, laced and bewigged, from the walls. It is not even the letters from the development office, which often accompany the invitations and which remind me of the possibility of remembering the College in my will. Rather it is the myriad ghosts of past Fellows, who, in spite of a shared and lifelong loathing of each other, were nevertheless obliged to eat a communal breakfast, luncheon and dinner here, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks of the year, with the possible merciful exception of Christmas Day. Dr Joyner had not been placed next to or directly opposite any of the other Fellows. They happily relinquished that pleasure to others.

Finally, Joyner pushed back his dessert plate, stretched out his legs, ran his fingers through his bristly ginger-grey hair and turned to face me.

'Not your sort of thing?' he asked.

'Why do you say that?'

'You just look bored out of your mind. And these dinners are tedious – especially if you don't get out much and aren't used to them.'

'I dine out quite often,' I lied.

'Really? Do you?'

'Yes,' I said. 'More than enough, I assure you.'

As a writer, I occasionally get asked to make after-dinner

speeches – as good a way to spoil a meal as any – though this evening there were, thankfully, to be none, other than a brief welcome from the new Principal. He seemed a nice man and, depressingly, much younger than I was.

Dr Joyner smiled a smile that was both private and at my expense, then picked up his wine glass. It contained just one or two lonely beads of red liquid. His eyes searched for a waiter. There wasn't one. The thought occurred to me, I don't know why, that it was no accident that a limit was being placed on his consumption of alcohol. The same idea may have occurred to him, because he put the glass down, more or less where it had been before, and sighed. He looked again at me but without any visible enthusiasm. We'd clearly both had better evenings.

'It's a while since I dined at the College, of course,' I conceded.

'When were you an undergraduate here?'

I told him.

'Not before that?'

'No,' I said.

'Are you certain? You look quite a lot older.'

'I came up just after they made you a Fellow,' I said.

'Ah . . .' he said, running his fingers again through the sparse bristles that now comprised his hairstyle. 'When I was made a Fellow. *Then.*'

Then indeed.

In my days as an undergraduate, Dr Joyner had been one of the more striking of the younger dons. His subject was history and mine geography. Our paths did not cross in a tutorial sense, but I did know him well. Everyone knew him well. It was difficult to ignore him. His three-piece suits, then, were

never less than immaculate. His hair flowed in strawberry blonde waves. His silk ties, always a single dazzling hue, were the envy of every male student. They were made, the rumour said, by Jim Thompson in Bangkok, and flown to Oxford a dozen at a time – rich, heavy, textured Thai silk in midnight-blue, scarlet, emerald, golden-yellow, slate-grey, Imperial purple, moss green, pale lilac – each costing more than we spent on clothes in a term. More perhaps, the rumour went on, than we had ever spent on anything in our entire lives. That seemed unlikely but there is, after all, little point in a half-hearted rumour.

His ties on their own would have generated nothing more than silent envy; it was the way he combined them with a rigid Marxist orthodoxy that demanded our absolute respect. The only history, he assured us, was the history of the proletariat. Nothing else was worthy of centre stage. Wars, kings, queens, literature, art and architecture were just noises off. The elegant sarabande of courtly politics would not have interested the average mediaeval serf, even if rumour of it had travelled down the muddy lanes to his remote village in Northumberland or Devon or Carmarthenshire. Joyner was, in those days, researching the lives of a family of peasants in Norfolk and intended to publish a comprehensive history of the fifteenth century based entirely on their class perspective and likely knowledge of events. The Battle of Bosworth, for example, was to appear only as a footnote to a chapter on the birth of a two-headed calf in the next village. As for the present day, he assured us of the imminent demise of late capitalist society in general and the University of Oxford in particular. There was no point in any of us working on

academic topics that did not interest us for their own sake. The chance of the university still existing when we were due to take finals was slim. The coming revolution would sweep it away, along with the House of Lords, fox hunting and the Henley Royal Regatta.

His views on the irrelevance of Oxford University did not, however, extend to his own career. He accepted with alacrity the History Fellowship offered to him by my College. He contemptuously rebuffed the northern red-brick universities that courted him with professorships while he was still in his twenties. Later, I learnt, he had declined to go even to London or Edinburgh. Perhaps they were insufficiently proletarian. His aim was to run the history department at Oxford on rigid and uncompromising Marxist lines. Nothing else would satisfy him.

Maybe, even now, he still hoped that would be possible. But more recent events had not been propitious. His magnum opus, *1485 – The Year of the Two-Headed Calf*, had been rejected by every major publisher in the country. Times were changing, and a Thatcherite Britain had been sceptical of its basic premise. A smaller and more conventional work on Richard III (entitled *Dickon, Thy Master*) made it into print but was trumped by another biography of the King, inconveniently published two months beforehand. His book had not gone to a second edition. After a while he became Tutor for Admissions at the College. His colleagues sensed he had time to take these things on.

There were of course other projects – many other projects – but publishers had looked at his sales figures and shaken their heads regretfully. He was now said to be working on a book about the English monasteries

immediately before their dissolution by Henry VIII, but a work in progress was unlikely, on its own, to win him a chair. Indeed, one of his former tutees, Anthony Cox, had recently been appointed to a history professorship and to a second, newly created, history fellowship at the College. Joyner was no longer the biggest history fish, even in this small, comfortable pond.

‘I read geography, of course,’ I said to him. ‘Not history.’

‘So what do you do now?’ he said. ‘Teaching? Town planning? There’s not much else you can do with a degree like that, is there? I’m assuming you’ve managed to find work of some sort by now? Unless they’ve already retired you.’

‘I write crime novels,’ I said. ‘One series is set in the late fourteenth century. A bit before your period perhaps.’

‘I expect that’s why they put you on High Table,’ he said.

‘As a historical writer?’

‘No, because the Principal’s secretary drew up the seating plan. She reads trashy crime novels. She might well have heard of you. What’s your name again?’

‘Ethelred Tressider,’ I said. ‘I write as Peter Fielding and as J. R. Elliot.’

‘I’m afraid she buys all sorts of stuff, even romantic fiction,’ he said, as if apologising for something particularly shameful to the College.

I’ve written that too, but for some reason it didn’t seem worth mentioning it, or that some readers knew me best as Amanda Collins.

‘I was told you were working on a book on monasteries in the sixteenth century,’ I said, carefully steering the conversation elsewhere.

Some people might have been mildly flattered that a relative stranger had followed their career to that extent, but Joyner did not seem to be one of them. He took it for granted that I would, all through the long years since my graduation, have kept up to date with his work, both published and unpublished.

‘Yes, that’s right . . .’ He looked thoughtful. ‘The dissolution of the monasteries. I was advised by a publisher I approached to find a new angle. So, I’ve focused on a single incident that somehow encapsulated the whole thing: an alleged dispute between two monastic houses in Sussex. Wittering Priory and Sidlesham Abbey.’

‘The buried treasure story?’ I said.

Dr Joyner looked surprised. Still not exactly impressed, but I’d managed surprised. ‘You’ve heard of it?’ he said suspiciously. Perhaps the angle was not as new as he’d hoped.

‘I live down there. It’s quite well known locally. On the eve of the dissolution of both houses, Sidlesham Abbey accused the Priory of having stolen some valuable items from them. But, after the buildings and their land were sold off by the King, nobody was able to locate the missing treasure in either place. Subsequent owners of both sites have dug for it over the years, but nobody has ever found any trace of it. It was probably quietly stolen by the Royal Commissioners sent to close the Abbey and Priory down. There was another dig at Sidlesham a few years ago, but I don’t think they found anything other than some broken pots and a few coins – rather like the time before and the time before that. Iris Munnings won’t

allow any sort of access to the Priory, of course. That's off limits to archaeologists. She's never wavered on that point. I can see that, if something really valuable was found there, then that might provide the sort of publicity that publishers like.'

Joyner looked at me with an interest that had been absent all evening. 'You *know* Iris Munnings?' he asked.

'Reasonably well,' I said, cautiously. 'I see her from time to time.'

To be absolutely clear, what I meant by this was that I sometimes ran into her in Horrocks Greengrocers in East Wittering or in the Co-op, or when she walked her dogs on West Wittering beach. But I'd only ever visited the Priory, her family home, as a paying customer, on days when she opened the gardens for charity. I'd never been inside the house itself, though I'd glanced enviously into the hallway once when the door was half-open. By no reasonable definition of the word could I claim we were friends. It was as I said: I saw her occasionally. She didn't necessarily see me.

'So you could introduce me to her?' said Joyner.

'Possibly,' I said. I was regretting claiming any sort of acquaintance. Still, her views on opening her garden up to archaeologists were well known in the village. I could speak with authority there. 'I have to warn you that she's a bit suspicious, for obvious reasons, of anyone who might want to search for buried treasure on her land. You wouldn't be the first to want to try. She won't have her lawns dug up. It's as simple as that.'

'But she doesn't know that's what I want to do.'

'I think she'll guess.'

‘Really?’

‘Yes. She’s pretty sharp.’

I didn’t add ‘for her age’, as I once might have done. I was aware how soon I would be her age and admired for being able to remember my own name.

‘Obviously I could come down to West Wittering in person to reassure her,’ Joyner said. ‘I’m a serious academic from a respectable university. Not some random oik from Billericay with a white van and a metal detector.’

There seemed very little that was strictly Marxist in this last statement. He clearly spoke Iris’s language these days. There were few people that she did not feel entitled to look down on. Perhaps, after all, he would get on with her quite well. But not well enough for what he wanted.

‘She still won’t let you dig there,’ I said. ‘Whatever colour your van is.’

Joyner did not smile. This was not a joking matter. ‘Oh, I think she will. When I tell her what I have to tell her. The story as previously related is wrong in a number of ways.’ His voice was suddenly lower and more urgent. ‘It is most fortuitous that we have met and that you can explain things to her. Much better than a letter from me on history department paper. She’ll listen to you when you explain what I’ve found out.’

‘And what would that be?’ asked a voice behind us.

We both turned to see Professor Cox, who had elected to tour the table in a proprietorial manner now that the serious work of eating was done. He looked, disconcertingly, like a younger, taller, more hygienic version of Joyner. His pristine black evening suit was brightened by a red silk bow tie. His face had a healthy

glow. A haze of aftershave hung around him like a summer morning. He smiled at us in a convivial manner.

‘None of your bloody business, Anthony,’ snapped Joyner.

‘I never said it was, Hilary. I never said it was. Is Dr Joyner telling you about his latest project, Ethelred? The OUP are annoyingly dithering over whether to accept his new book. I have to say I’ve always found them most reasonable, but they are proving inexplicably indecisive in this case. Still, it’s good that Hilary has a little research interest to occupy the regrettably brief time that remains to him here. If the OUP do turn it down, it should at least provide material for a short article for one of the popular history journals.’

Joyner said nothing. I think we both knew that Professor Cox had not intended ‘popular’ as a compliment.

‘It sounds very interesting to me,’ I said. ‘Since I live down that way myself, it’s a story I know quite well.’

‘I’m sure you do,’ said Professor Cox. ‘Local historians have been writing about it since the nineteenth century. I’ve pointed Hilary to one or two of the better papers. But I’m sure he will be able to find his new angle. A Marxist reinterpretation, quite possibly, though Hilary is less of a Marxist than he once was.’

Joyner still remained silent. His face did not appear to register Cox’s remarks in any way. But this was perhaps the response that Cox had been hoping for. He smiled softly. ‘So you live in Sussex, Ethelred?’

‘Yes, in West Wittering. Quite close to Wittering Priory. Walking distance, in fact.’

Cox nodded. ‘We have port in the Senior Common

Room afterwards, if you would like it. We could have a little chat. I've no doubt Hilary will be joining us. You can't keep Hilary away from port. Or sherry. Or brandy. Or gin. Or cheap, high-strength cider.' Cox finally turned back to Joyner. 'Eh, Hilary?' he said.

Joyner muttered something under his breath that I didn't quite catch.

Cox winked at me and moved on. He did not trouble my deaf neighbour, though she looked hopefully in his direction, but he stopped again beside a rather pretty girl in a red silk dress; she was, somebody had said, a junior research fellow, newly appointed. They seemed to know each other well. Cox's head was very close to hers. I heard her laugh. She glanced in my direction, smiled, and turned away again.

Joyner's eyes had followed Cox down the table, like a battle-scarred tomcat watching a passing terrier. He, too, now turned back to me.

'I'd be grateful if you told him nothing, Ethelred,' he said. 'Nothing at all. He is not well disposed towards the project.'

'I got that impression,' I said.

'He thinks I stole his idea.'

'And did you?'

'I'd have had every right. He's merely dabbled in the topic, as he does. I was the one who first took it seriously. I was the one who, long ago, discovered certain papers that he has most certainly never read – and never will, if I can help it. Now, a little too late, he's realised that he doesn't know as much as he thought he did. Well, let him continue to dabble, if he wishes. It won't hurt me. I'm a good ten or eleven months ahead of him.'

‘I didn’t think it was his period,’ I said. ‘The sixteenth century. Didn’t he write the book on . . .’

‘. . . Peel. Yes, everyone’s read that. It was on the *Sunday Times* bestseller lists for months. No bestseller can be accounted a serious scholarly work. As I say, he dabbles. Can’t stick to anything. A paper on the Corn Laws here, another on the destruction of mediaeval church silver there. The man is a total—’

But at that the Principal announced that coffee and port were available in the Senior Common Room for those who did not wish to repair immediately to the bar. We rose, individually or in small groups, and, at a leisurely pace, proceeded to one destination or the other.

Joyner must have been detained, because it was Professor Cox who approached me as I took a glass of port from the tray.

‘You’ve had a tedious evening,’ he said, ‘with Hilary on one side of you and dear Mrs Fosdike on the other – neither, in their respective ways, able to listen to anything you might have to say. There are none so deaf as those who can’t stop talking, eh? Did you like the pictures of Mrs Fosdike’s grandchildren?’

‘She didn’t get round to showing them to me, though she may have been considering it.’

‘Ah – that is a success of a sort. I must ensure that, when you next dine here, you are better seated. Really, I owe you that much.’

I was unaware he owed me anything. Or not yet, anyway.

‘I was flattered to be on High Table at all,’ I said cautiously.

‘A writer of your distinction?’ His eyes opened wide

with nicely judged incredulity. ‘Where else would we put you, Ethelred? You are far too modest.’

‘You’ve read some of my books?’ I asked, in the way that I so often do before being cruelly disappointed.

‘I saw a very good review of your Master Thomas series recently,’ he said silkily. ‘The one in the *Sunday Times*. And I liked the piece you did for the College magazine last term. Most amusing.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. I noticed he had still not said that he’d actually read the books. On the other hand, he had quite possibly taken the trouble to google me on his iPhone as he progressed the short distance across the quadrangle, on a warm summer’s evening, from the hall to the Senior Common Room. That was more than I might have reasonably expected.

‘Do you think this project of Hilary’s is going anywhere?’ he asked, lowering his voice. ‘I mean, the topic seems to have been thoroughly raked over already – a bit like the grounds of the Abbey, wouldn’t you agree?’

I nodded. From what I knew of it there had been a great deal of speculation and little hard evidence. ‘The Abbey treasure? It’s just one of those gothic folk tales, really.’

‘Not the dissolution of the monasteries in microcosm, as Hilary would like us to believe?’

‘Well, we have the rivalry between the houses, the King’s intervention, the monastery needlessly hastening its own end . . .’

‘Therein lies my objection,’ he said. He smiled, inviting my agreement.

‘You mean it adds nothing to what we know about the period?’ I said.

Cox gave me a smug grin, and I immediately felt I had been disloyal to Hilary Joyner, though, God knows, I owed him no loyalty of any sort whatsoever.

‘That’s Hilary for you,’ Cox said. ‘He’s never pursued a conventional academic path. He went from being a red to being . . . what you see today, almost overnight. All the more credit to him, I say. Follow your love of history without any regard to fame . . . or money . . . or your career . . . or the respect of your colleagues.’

He shrugged, as if to say that the definitive list of Dr Joyner’s sacrifices for his love of history was somewhat longer even than that. But we both knew, and he knew I knew, that obscurity had never been Hilary Joyner’s game plan. Cox possessed the very things that Joyner had always coveted, and that possession was made the sweeter by the knowledge that Joyner would have murdered to gain just a small part of what Cox had now.

‘Of course, he may have found something new,’ I said.

Cox permitted himself a dry, academic chuckle.

‘That’s very charitable of you, Ethelred, but I don’t think either of us really believes that, do we? I am aware, of course, that he has documents that he is withholding from me in a most unprofessional manner. That is a pity, because I in my turn have solid evidence that he would find interesting. Indeed, I have something in my room that would show him he was very, very wrong in one of his suppositions.’ Cox, aware that he might have said more than he should, looked over his shoulder. Joyner was a little way off, but possibly not entirely out of hearing range. Cox studied him for a moment, but nothing in Joyner’s expression suggested that he had just gained some

unexpected scholarly advantage. Cox turned back to me, relieved. 'But you've done some research on this yourself, Ethelred? You seem very knowledgeable.'

Again, there was a conspiratorial smile of encouragement that I did not trust at all.

'Not especially,' I said. 'I just live there and have found one or two references to it in books on the area.'

'You apparently know Iris Munnings. You might have discussed it with her?' He raised an eyebrow.

If he'd heard of Iris Munnings for the first time tonight, then he had a very good memory for names.

'I don't know her well,' I said.

'I see,' he replied. 'Then you will lack the very necessary influence with our friend Iris that Hilary was hoping for. It would make so much difference to his chances of publication if he could unearth some treasure. Something glittery and newsworthy that would persuade his publisher that he had finally hit upon a bestselling subject. But you should not feel too badly about it, Ethelred. It will be one of the smaller disappointments in Hilary's life.'

I nodded. Again, there had been more than a suggestion that Iris's name was already known to Professor Cox and that he perhaps knew her much better than I did – that he could have effected the much-desired introduction for Dr Joyner, had he chosen to do so. It seemed likely that Cox was, in fact, some way ahead of Joyner. It just wasn't clear why he was interested at all.

'But the Reformation . . . I thought your interests were nineteenth century?'

'I've written one or two well-received books on Peel

and Melbourne,’ he said with carefully honed modesty. ‘But the true historian limits himself to no period. His delight and happiness is the past in its entirety.’

‘Including 1536 to 1541?’

‘Precisely. When Henry VIII was appropriating the wealth of the church for the greater good of the kingdom. When the national character was taking shape around a dislike of foreigners and a desire to grab any free stuff that was going. Who could not be interested in those years?’

‘Of course,’ I said.

‘You think perhaps I should just leave it to Hilary? He would certainly have the leisure to do it justice in a way that I do not. My publisher is anxious I turn my attention to Gladstone. I’m not sure the world is ready for another study of the Grand Old Man, but I’m embarrassed to admit that the advance I have been offered is very tempting. Advances are ridiculously large these days, don’t you find?’

I didn’t find anything of the sort but, before I could think of a face-saving reply, Professor Cox simply smiled and moved on, a fact that became more understandable when I noticed that Dr Joyner was marching over to join us.

‘What was Cox saying?’ he demanded, much as Macbeth might have asked Macduff if he’d caught exactly what the third witch had just prophesied.

‘We were talking about the Sidlesham Abbey treasure,’ I said.

‘So, is he going off the idea of meddling in matters that don’t concern him?’

‘He thinks he may continue with it. But I’m not sure why.’

‘I am,’ he said. ‘Malice, spite and envy. But he’s not going to get to this one first. He may have stolen my professorship, he may have appropriated my rooms in College, but he’s not stealing my research. Or anything else. I’m coming straight down to Sussex, just as soon as you can arrange for me to see Iris Munnings.’

I still couldn’t decide whether Cox knew Iris Munnings, but I tended to agree with his assessment of my chances of success. There was no reason why she should do anything just because I said so. As I’ve said, she looked down on most people in the village and I had every reason to believe that she looked down on me too.

‘I’m not sure that will be possible . . .’ I said.

‘I may as well stay with you,’ Joyner said, ignoring any reservations I might have. ‘It will save time if I’m there in West Wittering.’

This proposal raised the stakes somewhat. I could see that it might save him time, but that didn’t mean it would be at all convenient for me to have a guest over the weekend. I’d already fended off one prospective visitor. I proposed to be equally firm with this one.

‘I’m very busy at the moment,’ I said. ‘Very busy indeed.’

‘As a crime writer? Really?’

‘I have a book to finish. I’ve had to tell my agent that she can’t come down and stay next weekend. I’ve just sent her an email saying that a visit is out of the question. It’s not you personally, Dr Joyner. I’d love to have you visit. Nothing could please me more. It’s just that having even one person staying with me will prevent my doing any writing at all.’

And I cannot afford that. Not with my current deadline. I'm really so very sorry . . .'

He looked at me as if trying to decide whether what I said was in any way possible.

Then a beep announced a text. I took the phone out of my pocket. The message was from my agent.

SORRY. DIDN'T GET YOUR LATEST EMAIL SO I AM COMING AS PLANNED FRIDAY. PICK ME UP AT THE STATION AT 8.30. WITH LUCK I MAY BE ABLE TO STAY UNTIL TUESDAY. GOOD, EH? ELSIE XXX

Dr Joyner, looking over my shoulder, nodded. 'It appears that your weekend is ruined anyway, then,' he said. 'You're not going to get any work done. So, fortunately for us both, my coming down won't make any difference. Since you'd love to have me staying with you, I wouldn't think of going anywhere else. I doubt there's anywhere much to stay in West Wittering anyway.'

'Yes, there is,' I said.

'But I'd hate to disappoint you,' he said. 'And they'll probably be booked up at this time of year.'

'I could phone and check,' I said.

'I wouldn't put you to so much trouble,' he said generously. 'I'll try to arrive on the same train as your agent, to save you having to go to the station twice. It looks as if she's planning to be on the one that arrives at eight-thirty – but, just to be sure, email me and I'll make absolutely certain I'm on board the right one. I'd be most grateful if you could confirm the arrangements promptly.'

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘That’s very thoughtful of you. Very thoughtful indeed.’

In all honesty, his strange death, a few days later, came as no surprise to me at all.