

A mystery novel

Birdwatchers will kill to get a first sighting. Perhaps one of them did....

Sea Fever



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“Was there anything unusual about this trip?” beautiful Inspector Bingham asked. “Did you notice anything different from the other three?”

He considered.

“They were more serious,” he said. “About the birdwatching like. On the other trips there were one or two fanatics, but most were there to have a good time. They wanted to see the birds, but if they didn’t, it wouldn’t be the end of the world. On this one you felt it was a matter, well, of life and death. . . .”

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*E*ven if there had been no murder, the last trip of the season of the *Jessie Ellen* would have been news. A new bird for the world, after all, is rather special. There would undoubtedly have been interviews with specialist reporters, speculation about where the bird could possibly breed, sponsorship, perhaps, for an expedition to track it down to a cliff in some lonely and uninhabited island. There was, George felt all along, a relationship between the murder of the boy and the sighting of a storm petrel never before recorded. He was not so superstitious that he considered the death as a cause of the appearance of the bird. It was no sacrifice to the forces of nature. Neither did he see the petrel as an albatross bringing misfortune and disaster with its astounding beauty. Yet he thought that if the bird had never appeared, flying so close to the boat that they could make a plan of its wing formula and see the colour of the webs of its feet, Greg Franks would still be alive. Certainly the boy's death spoiled the bird for them. They hated him, as if it were his fault, because the elation and joy which should have lasted for weeks was cut short, and the fame they deserved was denied to them.

George Palmer-Jones met Greg Franks first at Holywell Pond, a Northumberland Wildlife Trust Reserve. The memory of the meeting was strangely vivid, though there had been many such incidents in his birdwatching career. Afterwards, when other rare birds turned up, he looked out for

Greg and noticed him. Despite that, when Mr. and Mrs. Franks hired him to trace their missing son, he did not at first connect them with the boy who had disturbed the Bailon's crake at Holywell. When he did, the memory of the day returned to him sharp and complete, as if it had happened only minutes before.

It had been early June, a hot and sticky day with the threat of thunder and swallows flying low over yellow rape fields. The field by the pond was waist-high with buttercups, clover, and cow parsley. George arrived at the hide overlooking the pond at lunchtime, to discover that the bird had not been seen that day. It was probably skulking in the reed bed, said the exultant locals who had found the bird. It often did that.

The hide was full of people crammed together along the bench seat, waiting. There was the smell of hot creosote and damp vegetation. They talked occasionally, but their attention was on the still water. They were prepared to wait until evening. "Just be patient," said the locals. "It came out at dusk yesterday. It won't have gone anywhere."

Then Greg Franks burst into the hide. He seemed physically incapable of patience. He paced across the wooden floor smoking one cigarette after another, and his restlessness was so obvious, so flamboyant, that he unsettled all the others there.

"I want some action," he said at last. "I'm going in. I need this bird."

"Don't be a fool, man," said one of the locals, a big square man with hands like spades. "You'll scare it off; then no one will see it. This is a nature reserve. Do you think the trust will put out news of other rarities if you go tramping all over it?"

He stood up to confront Greg, blocking his way, and George thought there might be a fight. But Greg was too quick for them. He slipped out of the hide and into the reserve. They saw his sleek black head moving like a stoat's through the reed bed. A moorhen gave an alarm call and splashed into view. In the hide there was silence.

Suddenly the crake was in the open, flying. It was so close to the hide that they could not focus their binoculars onto it.

The bird flew around the pond once more, and they thought it would settle again at the edge of the water to give more prolonged views, but it changed direction and disappeared very quickly in the heat haze. Greg Franks must have tripped in the reed bed, because when he stood up to wave his arms triumphantly at them, he was dripping wet, and his hair straggled like seaweed across his face.

When he returned to the hide, George was surprised by the reception the boy received. The bird had been frightened off by an act of stupid exhibitionism, yet the watchers were indulgent, as if George were a spoilt but gifted child who should be allowed his own way. They had, of course, obtained brilliant if fleeting views of the bird. The birdwatchers who arrived later in the afternoon were less understanding and threatened unimaginable tortures to Franks if they should catch him.

In the following year George Palmer-Jones saw Greg Franks several times. He was on Scilly for most of October and seemed suddenly to be at every new bird. Recently, George saw, he had taken to driving a maroon Mercedes with American numberplates.

He usually had a group of friends with him—wild young men like himself and pretty girls. There were rumours that he made his money through drug dealing or theft or some vaguely illegal deals with friends in the city. He always seemed to have money, and he was always one of the first to arrive at a rarity, but no one seemed too concerned about what lay behind his apparent affluence. Birdwatching is full of eccentrics. They were more interested in his list.

The subject of Greg Franks' list was brought up wherever the more avid twitchers gathered together. It must be immense, they said. Now he went for everything. Surely it must rival the older twitchers who had those blockers from the sixties. Surely by now it must be as big as Roger Pym's.

George was not one of those for whom the speculation about lists is as important as seeing the birds themselves, and when he and his wife were hired by Mr. and Mrs. Franks to trace their missing son, he made no connection with Greg.

It was more than a year after the visit to Holywell Pond. The first contact was by phone, and George took the call.

“Yes,” he said. “Palmer-Jones.”

The woman on the other end of the phone had a Bristol accent, and her voice was breathless and shaking with nerves.

“That is Mr. Palmer-Jones, the private detective?” she insisted.

He hated the term, but she was so anxious already that he only said, “How can I help you?”

Then, in an incoherent stream of words, she pleaded with him to visit her and Mr. Franks at home. They were desperate, and the problem was too difficult, she said, too personal, to discuss on the telephone. It was midsummer, a quiet time for work and for birding, and George agreed to go to see them.

They found the house on a long and busy road in a soulless Bristol suburb close to the Rolls-Royce factory. George’s wife, Molly, was driving. It was a dual carriageway, with a motorway roundabout at one end and a bus station at the other. The house was mock Tudor, semidetached, with leaded windows and black beams on the gables. In a quiet cul-de-sac it might have been considered a desirable place to live, but with the lorries thundering past the wrought iron gates, it seemed desolate, stranded in a treeless no-man’s land.

The Franks must have been waiting for them, because the door opened immediately. Molly reached the house first because the driver’s seat was next to the pavement, and George had to wait for a break in the traffic before he dared leave the car; yet the man inside looked past her, as if she were invisible or not worth speaking to.

“Mr. Palmer-Jones,” he said. The Bristol accent was unusually hard and rather high-pitched. “It was good of you to come.”

He had to shout against the traffic noise. He gestured for them to enter the house, then shut the door firmly behind them. They stood uncertainly in a dark hall. He was a small, solid, vigorous man. Despite the heat he wore a long cardigan over a sticky nylon shirt. In the background Mrs. Franks hovered fussily. Dennis Franks did not introduce her.

“Come into the lounge,” he said, still directing his words to George. “I expect you’d like some tea.” He turned to his wife. “Tea!” he said, and she disappeared through the kitchen door.

The living room was square, with a bay window which looked out over the main road. As they talked, the roar of the traffic outside filled the silences in their conversation. It was late August and hot, but none of the windows were open. The bright sunshine was filtered through net curtains, so everything seemed rather overcast and dusty. Every available surface was covered with china and glass ornaments, vases of silk flowers, framed photographs, so it seemed to George that there was hardly room to move.

“It was good of you to come,” Dennis Franks repeated. “My wife thought you might not understand over the telephone. I decided it would be better to ask you to come here.”

George felt stifled and trapped. There were better places to be in the last week of August. In the valleys of south-west Cornwall the first autumn migrants would be arriving. He should be planning his usual bank holiday birding weekend in Norfolk.

“What is the problem, precisely?” he asked, facing his attention back to the room. “You’d like us to trace your son?”

“That’s right!” The man’s voice was sharp and irritable. “He’s been missing for months. We hear about him occasionally, and sometimes he phones up to tell his mother he’s all right, but he moves around a lot, and we never know where he is.”

“Is there any special reason for wanting to trace him now?” George asked.

“It was Muriel’s idea,” Franks said angrily. “She thought it was the right thing to do. I want to sell the business, and she thinks the lad should be consulted before I go ahead. I told her there’s no chance that he’d want to come back here and work for the family. He made that quite clear when he left home. I’m not sure what she’s doing. I think it’s only an excuse to get him home. She misses him.”

He spoke as if this were some unaccountable weakness. Molly watched him curiously.

“What is your business?” she asked, and realised at once that it had been the right question. He spoke to her directly for the first time.

“Franks’ Meat Products,” the man said with pride. “We make sausage skins. They’re famous in the trade. I’ve been offered a very good price.”

“Who advised you to contact us?” George asked. Before his retirement he had worked as a civil servant with the Home Office. More recently he and his wife had started an enquiry agency. They were based in Surrey, and though they received referrals occasionally from solicitors in other parts of the country, it was unusual to be contacted by an unknown member of the public. They never advertised their services.

“No one advised me,” Franks said. He seemed surprised. “I heard about you from Gregory, of course, when he was still at home. You’re a birdwatcher, aren’t you? You must have heard of our Gregory. I understand that he’s something of a celebrity in his own field.”

“Of course,” George said. “Greg Franks. Yes, of course.”

And he was taken back immediately to the hide in Northumberland, and the memory of the incident with the Bailon’s crake returned to him with astonishing clarity.

He was still absorbed in the daydream when Muriel Franks came in carrying a tray. She was small, nervous, sharp-featured, quite determined, it seemed, that she would get her own way.

“You will help us find Gregory, won’t you Mr. Palmer-Jones?” she said.

“I don’t think there’ll be any trouble at all,” he said. He wanted to reassure her. She seemed so tense that he was afraid she might make a scene. “You see,” he continued, speaking gently, hoping to calm her, “any of the younger birdwatchers will have his phone number. I’m sure I can put you in touch with someone who will know where he is. If I’d realised when you telephoned who your son is, I would have been able to help you then. You don’t need us to do it.”

He was wondering how much he could charge Franks for his wasted day.

"Oh, no," Muriel said so violently that he realised the obsession with her son was a desperation. She did not really want to consult Greg about the family business. She was not even concerned for his safety. She just wanted him home with her. "That won't do at all. You must see Gregory. Personally." And then, as if reading George's mind, she added, "We don't care what it costs. Do we, Dennis?" There were already tears in her eyes.

Her husband shrugged uneasily. Molly was surprised that he said so little. Perhaps he was fond of her and did not like to see her unhappy. Perhaps this independence was such a surprise to him that he did not know how to handle it.

"You must persuade Gregory to come home," Mrs. Franks continued. She spoke very quickly. "Then we can discuss the sale of the business properly. We couldn't do that over the phone. He wouldn't take us seriously. He never does."

She looked at her husband for support, but he turned away, as if embarrassed that she made her wishes so obvious. There was an awkward silence.

"Have you any other children?" Molly asked.

Muriel Franks shook her head violently.

"No," she said. "Only Gregory." She hesitated, and George was afraid she would cry again. "We were lucky to keep him," she said at last. "He was a sickly baby. He spent most of his first year in Frenchay Hospital. Perhaps that's why he's always been so special."

Molly spoke gently. "If Gregory hasn't come home of his own accord," she said, "I don't think anything we say could persuade him. You'd been wasting your money."

"You don't understand," Muriel Franks interrupted eagerly. "That's why we asked you to come here. Mr. Palmer-Jones has been a hero of Gregory's since he was a little boy. I remember him saying, when he was still at home, 'George Palmer-Jones is the only member of the British Birds Rarity Committee you can really trust. He knows more about bird identification than any man in Europe.' " She turned to her husband, her eyes bright, her voice brittle with hope. "He used to say that, didn't he, Dennis? All the time?"

The father nodded in sad agreement. Outside, the traffic rumbled past, and Molly thought that Muriel could not have been an easy woman to live with. Perhaps her husband's cold autocracy was his only means of survival.

Muriel Franks turned back to George. "If you were to go and see Greg and ask him, he'd come back. I'm sure he would."

George looked helplessly at Molly. Mrs. Franks' determination to keep her son at home was unnatural, he thought. Greg was in his early twenties, no longer a child. She was balanced precariously between elation and depression. He was frightened of saying something which would tip her into some kind of breakdown. Throughout the exchange Dennis Franks looked on anxiously. Occasionally he reached out towards his wife, as if he was going to pat her hand to calm her, but he seemed almost frightened of touching her. He stared at George without giving any indication of what he wanted the man to say.

"I don't know that I could be so persuasive," George said at last.

"You could!" Muriel cried. "Tell him that if we decide to sell the business, a share of the profit would be his. Of course all our money will go to him in the end, but we could make something available to him now. But we need him here to discuss it."

Molly thought that the purchase of her son's affection was a strategy she must have tried before. Molly and George looked at one another, each hoping the other would have the courage to disappoint the woman. There was a strained silence, which Muriel Franks took suddenly and irrationally as consent to her plans. She leapt to her feet, her face flushed with triumph.

"I knew I could make you understand if you came here and met us," she said. "You don't know what this means to me. I don't think I could carry on without the hope that I might see Greg again soon."

Then George knew that the decision had been made for him, and that he would find it impossible to refuse the work. Dennis Franks looked on with silent bewilderment and pain.

Muriel remained standing, as if she expected them to leave at once to find her son. She had expected immediate and dramatic action. Molly looked at her with concern.

"We'll need to know a little more about Gregory," she said. "When did he first leave home?"

Perhaps they could help, she thought, just by allowing the woman to talk about her son. Perhaps that was more important than persuading Greg that he should show her a little consideration by visiting her occasionally and letting her know where he was staying.

Muriel returned reluctantly to her seat. "I don't know," she said. "Not exactly. About twelve months ago. He's phoned since then, but he's not been back to stay."

Dennis came to her rescue. "He was always hard to keep at home," he said. "Even as a lad."

"Has he ever been in trouble with the police?" Molly asked.

"He was charged once," Franks said. "It was soon after he'd left school. We didn't find out until later. We thought he'd disappeared on one of his birdwatching trips. He was in a bail hostel in the city. But he was found not guilty in the Crown Court. He hasn't got a criminal record."

"What was he charged with?"

"Burglary," Franks said. "He was supposed to have broken into a house."

"It was all lies," Muriel Franks interrupted. "The case was thrown out. He should have come to us and told us all about it. We would have understood. We always did. We only found out he'd been in court because there was a fire in the hostel, and Greg's picture was in the paper. He was a hero. He saved someone."

She seemed about to launch into the details of Greg's heroism, but, with one of her sudden swings of mood, changed her mind.

"All this isn't important!" she said impatiently. "I can tell you exactly where Greg will be this weekend. You should be getting ready to meet him, not talking about the past." She sprang once again to her feet. "A letter came here a while ago by mistake," she said. "It wasn't personal—I

wouldn't ever open his personal mail—but I thought it might give me some idea where he was. I knew it would be useful. I'll get it for you!" She hurried from the room.

Dennis Franks moved uneasily in his chair. On the road outside there was the squeal of brakes and the sound of a horn.

"I don't know what to do for the best," he said. "She's set her heart on seeing him. I know he'll not stay, but when he comes, he always puts on a big show—brings her flowers and that—so he makes her happy for a while. I'm afraid she's made herself ill. She's always been wrapped up in him. Perhaps when I retire, I'll be able to help her more. . . . It's a difficult age for a woman. . . ."

He coughed a small, embarrassed cough, and they waited for Muriel Franks to return.

She rushed back into the room, breathless and eager, waving a folded piece of white paper. In the other hand was a brown envelope. She handed the paper to George, who read it carefully. The letter was a receipt and confirmation of booking. It was from a travel agency which specialised in natural history and birdwatching, based in Bristol. It said that a place had been reserved for Gregory Franks on the pelagic trip which would leave Heanor on August 27th. Accommodation had been booked at Myrtle Cottage at Porthkennan for the remainder of the week. It was signed by Rob Earl, the agency's resident ornithologist.

"I didn't understand it," Muriel Franks said. "What is a pelagic trip anyway?"

"*Pelagic* is an American expression," George said, "It's a boat trip especially organised to allow birdwatchers the best possible views of rare seabirds."

But as he spoke, he was staring at the letter like a boy at a forbidden box of matches. It was a temptation. Of all birds he loved seabirds best. To George, a child brought up in the Midlands, they had represented the freedom of seaside holidays. Now he was drawn by the mystery of their life at sea. There was a challenge to find out more about them.

"Will you go?" Muriel Franks demanded. "We'll pay all your expenses. Will you go to Cornwall to talk to Gregory?"

In the stifling room, surrounded by traffic noise, in the company of these unhappy people, Cornwall was suddenly irresistible. George knew he should wait, discuss the thing with Molly, that to go would only encourage a neurotic woman in her fantasies, but he could not help himself.

“Yes,” he said, trying to sound as if the decision had been a difficult one to make. “Yes, we’ll go.”

Rob Earl was fast asleep, dreaming of teeming Wilson’s petrels and shearwaters as big as vultures which flew so close to him that he could reach out his hand and feel the rush of wind as they passed. He was in his office, leaning back in his chair with his feet on his desk. He had come to work with a hangover. The night before, he and his boss had become stupendously drunk. When his boss had offered to take him out for a drink, he had been afraid that it was to give him the sack. It seemed a luxury for a provincial chain of travel agents, even one specially involved with birdwatchers, to employ a resident ornithologist. In fact, it was to tell Rob that the agency was being bought out by a Bristol businessman. “We need fresh capital,” he had said in an attempt to persuade himself and Rob that the move was a positive one. “He’s promised me there’ll be no major changes. We’ll be able to expand. That must compensate for any loss of independence.”

Yet despite his words he drank with a depressed and determined ferocity, and Rob felt obliged to keep up with him. He had no idea what the change of organisation would mean to him, but his boss wanted to buy him drinks, and he was prepared to drink them. They ended up in a scruffy old pub at the top of Cromwell Road, and Rob could not remember walking home.

As he spent the morning answering the phone and checking airline timetables, he supposed he was getting too old for such excess. At lunchtime he shut his office door, took his phone off the hook, and went to sleep.

He woke to the sound of his secretary next door, banging inexpertly at a typewriter. Laura was employed under the youth training scheme. Rob frowned. It was not only that the

noise irritated his hangover. He cared about his work. It offended him to send letters thick with Liquid Paper to his customers. He needed a break, he thought. He had spent too long in the office. He looked forward to a week in Cornwall. He began to drowse again, when he heard Laura talking. There were other voices which he recognised, and he wondered for an instant if he was dreaming again.

“George!” he shouted through the closed door. “What are you doing here? Where are you going? Have those bloody Cornish birders been suppressing again? Why are you the only foreigner they’re prepared to talk to?”

The door opened, and George and Molly walked into the office. George looked at the recumbent figure behind the desk. Permanent employment had failed to give Rob Earl an air of respectability. He was unshaven, hollow-eyed. Molly had always liked him but thought he was reckless and a little dangerous.

“You’re getting paranoid. It’s nothing to do with the birds.” George spoke sternly, perhaps because he needed to convince himself that he was there strictly on business. By his side Molly stood quietly, discreetly disapproving. She thought there were other ways of helping Muriel Franks than to drive to Porthkennan. In the car there had been an argument. “At least it’s only indirectly to do with birds. We want your help. And perhaps the Cornish birders tell me about rare birds because I don’t call them ‘bloody Corns.’ ”

Laura had begun to type again. Rob looked at his watch. “The pubs are open,” he said. “Let’s have a drink, and you can tell me all about it. I haven’t got long. I’m going to Porthkennan to stay with Rose Pengelly this afternoon.”

“We haven’t time for a drink,” George said. “And I know about Porthkennan. We’re here on business. We need to talk to Greg Franks. You *are* still expecting him on the pelagic you’ve organised?”

Rob rummaged through the papers on his desk and pulled out a typed list. “Yes,” he said. “He confirmed the booking last week.”

He looked up at George and smiled. Molly thought again that he was dangerous. “Why don’t you come with us,