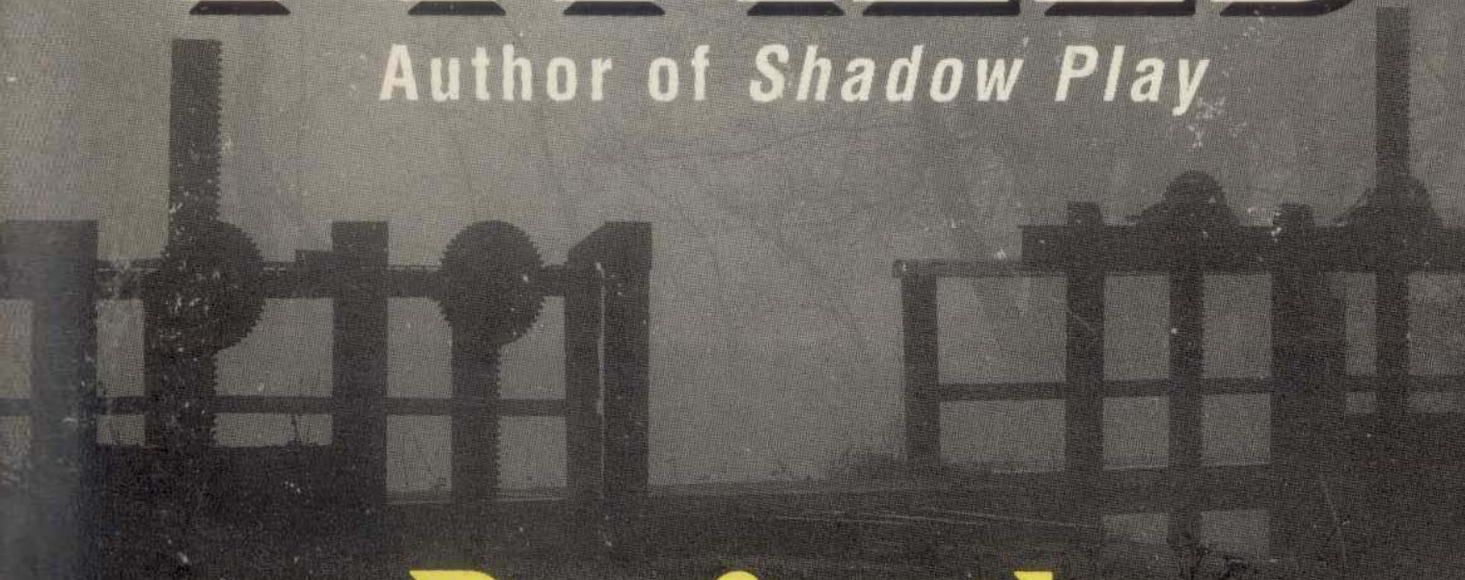
Silver Dagger Award–Winner

FRANCES FYFIELD

Author of *Shadow Play*



Perfectly Pure and Good

"ELEGANT AND UNNERVING...
Another haunting story of romantic obsession...
with] richly detailed portraits of complex people."
—*The New York Times Book Review*

Ballantine/Mystery/38279/U.S. $5.99

PERFECTLY GOOD

Frances Fyfield

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

 Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York. Originally published in Great Britain by Bantam Press, a division of Transworld Publishers Ltd., in 1994. First published in the United States by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc., in 1994.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 93-40244

ISBN 0-345-38279-X

This edition published by arrangement with Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Cover photo © Frank V. Blackburn/Windrush Photos, England.

First Ballantine Books Edition: April 1995

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PROLOGUE

It was an ordinary place. People lived and died in it. On Sunday mornings in summer, some of the men who lived nearest gathered on the quay to gossip. News of death was underplayed; views of life, casual. For most of them, like Stonewall's new father, who did not frequent the pubs unless driven by a louder-than-usual row indoors, the occasion was a mixed relief. All of them made it look as if they had met by accident. When they dispersed, they did not arrange to meet again, same place, same time. That would have been some kind of admission, as if they needed one another. Which they did, but could not say.

The overgrown village of Merton on Sea boasted a population of eight thousand, doubling in summer. The high street formed the undulating backbone of the village, flanked by alleys and uneven cottages spreading out like crooked limbs. The main thoroughfare, too narrow for the dustbin van, wound uphill away from the quay into an almost elegant square surrounding a green. Here, where the merchants in wool and grain had lived a century before, the houses were large and ponderous, governed by the Crown, Merton's only hotel. The town-cum-village, large enough to form a metropolis on this underpopulated length of the flat East Coast, fizzled out further inland beyond the council estate and the church, the last cottages giving way to rich farmland with never a hill in sight.

Merton was a conurbation which had grown on trade and fishing, been eclipsed and grown again without the benefit of planners or preservers, so that the visitor's abiding memory was one of obstinacy rather than beauty, haphazard charm rather than style. If Merton had aspirations, they were humble, a desire for consistency rather than change, an understated pride which could never see the point in the newfangled, a sense of order which would always defy chaos and a self-sufficiency made necessary by isolation. The inhabitants were ruled by good sense, kept promises to one another, did not mind their own business and only fleeced the holiday-makers enough to make a modest living. They neither noticed nor cared how the blatant vulgarity of the quay's front marred the Victorian splendour of the rear enough to deter any serious follower of taste. The people who lived in Merton liked it the way it was.

So did the holiday-makers and holiday-home owners. Those of lesser luck or affluence, unable to face the forest of bed-and-breakfast signs, where the landladies made no concession to foreign habits, rented a caravan on the camp site a mile from town, reached on foot by the raised causeway along the sea defences. This path, hiding the road on the landward side, ran alongside the wide inlet which led to the busy public beach, the lifeboat station, the pine woods and the miles of unadulterated sand which stretched west. Sometimes, where sea joined inlet, seals would play. There were beach huts, mostly old and crooked, flanking the woods.

At high tide, Merton became part of the sea. The inlet filled with water deep enough for the passage of small steamers which occasionally anchored, along with fishing vessels and an increasing number of pleasure craft of the less expensive variety, hobby boats rather than yachts, in keeping with Merton's obdurate lack of style. At low tide, the view altered

dramatically. Gazing seaward from outside the amusement arcade, there was nothing beyond the car park but boats listing sideways and sand banks topped with reluctant vegetation in a vista of browny-green land, full of hidden detail invisible to the eye. People parked on the quayside car park, peered down at the moored boats, saw the same flat view to the east, and ate hamburgers with onions from the arcade or fish and chips from one of three sources. In July it was something to do. Merton's entertainments were not otherwise sophisticated.

The men on the quay on Sunday mornings gathered thus only in summer: in winter you could scarcely stand out there. Male gossip was more restrained than the female kind, and only the youngest men ever dared venture a remark on the girls passing by, reserving any unkindness for strangers only. Stonewall's stepfather never felt quite comfortable standing there on the edge of the water, particularly if the tide was down and all that stretched into view was the peculiarly inviting, earth-and-sand-smelling channels leading out to the sea. He never stood there without thinking of himself as a kind of pretender, a man who kept secrets. When one of the lads gave a low wolf-whistle, he could only quiver with embarrassment, think of the woman he had watched, two years before, drunk and scarred, staggering along on her unsteady way out for a morning walk down the creeks. Or rather, he had not watched; the boy with him, little Stonewall, had watched, pointed, sniggered and been cuffed gently round the ear for his rudeness. They had watched her go down the high street, bypassing the medical centre although she looked as though she could use a doctor, then seen her grinning at her own hideous reflection, first in the shop windows, then in the water. The man still shuffled when he thought of that, shuddered when he thought of what happened next after they'd gone out

in the boat. Poor Stonewall had hated the water; he had to be forced to learn because no-one who lived as close to it as they did could afford to shy away.

'Nice day for it,' one of the men would always remark, never specifying further and never being asked, while Stonewall's stepfather wished that the sea would come back and obscure the vision of his mind's eye. First that woman with her cloud of red hair, Mrs Tysall he had later learned, looking so drunk and so tired, teetering out over the muddy sand in her unsuitable shoes, a real townie; and then the same woman, without shoes and without life, lying with her hands twisted in the sea heather up at the far end of the creeks, her mouth full of sand, her red hair damp and matted, a smell beginning to rise from her, still mainly the smell of the sea, which reminded him of sex. Saw her living one day, found her dead the next when out on another outing with that miserable kid, Stonewall, that parcel of skinny, asthmatic baggage which came alongside his beautiful widowed mum, and had to be taught to understand the tide.

Stonewall would scream whenever he was put in a boat and rowed up the creeks to find a place where the water formed safe and shallow pools, but once there, the child changed tack completely and became calm, ready to play and sing to himself for hours, leaving the man he would not yet call Dad free to dig for the lugworms he needed for bait. The relief when Stonewall stopped crying was always tremendous. The crying, a breathless keening, always made his stepfather sick. If he did not get this boy right, the whole edifice of his marriage would crumble, he knew it like he knew the time of day and he knew these creeks. Silence down here, a sense of contentment and the brink of a breakthrough with the boy; peace.

Until he had turned to one side, seen that red-haired lump with her long brown legs spread and her heavy

skirt plastered with mud. Two years of Sundays had passed and he could still feel the panic now, like a mouthful of salt water. Remembered himself thinking, The silly bitch, how could she do this to a boy? Lying there, obscene in death, her head half embedded in the bank, her hands raised above, twisted into the heather as if to anchor herself there. Waiting for a child to find her and begin the screaming nightmares all over again.

No Merton-born man travelled ill-equipped and, besides, he had come prepared to dig for bait. Inside fifteen furious minutes, using his spade and closing his ears to the sound of sloppy sand on dead flesh, he had buried her, right there in the depths of the bank, just before the boy came back from the pool. He had meant no harm, he had meant for the best. Let someone else find her; someone unburdened by an hysterical child and a heavily pregnant wife. Let the tide hide this red-haired bitch here until tomorrow when he was at work and the boy was safe. Let it hide her, preferably for ever.

From that day on, though, Stonewall had stopped his screaming, took to the creeks like a duck. It seemed that some god somewhere approved.

'Found another body, they did, so I heard, off Stookey,' one of the men said, covering a gap in conversation, while a thin thread of smoke from his cigarette drifted upwards. Stonewall's dad jangled the coins in his pockets to hide his own discomfiture. The friendly coast yielded three or four bodies a year, swept from God knows where. Mostly men, overboard from a tramp steamer, big men, rarely identified, the homeless of the sea. A corpse was always a matter of remark, but hardly news any more and never in front of the children. Sometimes it was difficult to tell how long a man had been in the water or rotting in the sand where they were found. Mrs

Charles Tysall had taken a whole year to surface, as far as anyone knew. Unlike the indigent sailors, she had been identified, her death the subject of speculation, her strange reappearance the stuff of long, public-house and hairdressing-shop debate. Stonewall's stepfather had never said a thing: he had been either too wise or too shocked. A body was only a body. He had his own kin to look after.

The guilt only lingered on the Sabbath, when he thought of that woman's husband coming back to look at her after she was found. Stricken by grief, walking out over the sands to see where she had lain, never coming back. She would have been a beautiful woman once, before she had acquired that dreadful, lacerated face. Someone must have loved her, ached for her, yearned for her in the year she had lain buried before the freak storm broke the bank and sicked her up.

That Charles Tysall had indeed loved her in his vile obsessive way, was something his wife Elisabeth had never doubted, but the nature of the love had been as cruel as the tide, requiring the same complete possession of everything it touched, punishing insubordination with violence. She had played for attention, misunderstood the nature of the madness, flaunted her red hair and her own perfection. Therefore, in complete accordance with his own logic, it had been entirely justifiable to beat her into submission, beginning with the face.

The men on the quay knew nothing of this, then or now. Nor what Elisabeth had thought while lying there with her hands self-imprisoned among the heather, waiting for the pills and the gin to work and hoping this would be revenge on him, and then, thinking too late, of what she might have left. Thinking of how she should not be doing this, dying without a whimper or a warning. It was so unfair to whoever followed. She, who had never been a friend to women, felt suddenly and sharply for her own

kind, knew with terrible certainty what she had begun. Without her, Charles would simply find another obsession, some other red-haired pet to torment. Elisabeth murmured a prayer for her successor, let the thought of her slide away, closed her eyes, waited for the sea, slipped at last into the oblivion she had craved for days. Waited for the tide and never felt it.

A body was only a body, the man on the quay thought again. Since that woman had died, and then punished him by coming back, he had acquired twins and his wife was pregnant again. It was only because he so loved his own woman that he felt guilt for that other husband. The guilt was wasted, had he known. As the sea had swept over the slumbering form of Elisabeth Tysall, her husband Charles lay on a couch in their extravagant London home, reading his favourite poet, Browning, remembering his wife in the days when she was perfectly pure, obedient and good.

> . . . Happy and proud; at last I knew
> Porphyria worshipped me: surprise
> Made my heart swell, and still it grew . . .

I love you, my Porphyria, he had told himself. Did you not know? Come back, before I find another.

One death alters nothing and everything. As Elisabeth Tysall's hair floated out beneath the water, the erstwhile landlord of her holiday cottage felt the first intimations of mortality. In a large house half a mile beyond the end of the quay in the opposite direction from the public beach, Mr Henry Pardoe, entrepreneur, self-made man of frugal habits and large pretensions, played Scrabble with his timid little wife and found, to his amazement, he enjoyed it. She let him win, of course, something he half realized but blocked the full knowledge. He rubbed his chest where the faint, but nagging pain was a constant re-

minder to him to make a will sooner rather than later, although he did not seriously believe in death as a concept and was damned if he'd pay that old rogue Ernest Matthewson his London rates the way he had always done in the past. Daylight robbery. Mouse would help him draft a will. He looked at her faded prettiness with affection.

Life went on as the hungry tide came back through the channels and covered the earth. The coastline shifted with the seasons, flooded at high tide, drained by the low. Which meant that everything was the same, no matter who lived and died.

The men on the quay broke ranks. They made laconic farewells, drifted indoors for the innocent pleasure of the Sunday meal.

CHAPTER ONE

Malcolm Cook, advocate for the Crown, legal if cynical vigilante against injustice, was dark, lean, thirty-five. The only weight he carried was a surfeit of knowledge. He knew more about man's inhumanity to man, and rather less about domestic harmony, than he liked. While his work was merely the reflection of human perfidy, his own reflection was something he tried to avoid. An aversion to mirrors often sent him out of doors wearing odd socks.

This morning he could not ignore his own image as he shaved, and as usual, felt himself flinching. A mirror was a cruel object. The contrast between himself as he had been before, a grossly fat clown of a man, and the thing he was now, streamlined by his own efforts into the shape of a marathon runner, was a sight which occasionally amused him. He would shake his head, smiling, expecting the old self to return, knowing the new one was merely a figment which did not fit the description of handsome, however often it was applied. These days, the contrast he saw in his own expression was more immediate. He looked old and worried, like his adoptive father in the throes of illness. The comparison between this and the person who sang through his morning ablutions was one which wounded him. He was losing something, and with it, all his fragile self-esteem. It felt like losing his teeth.

'Get down, you silly girl,' he muttered without

taking his eyes away from the mirror. At least the dog, with her constant need to be close, never wavered in her affections, followed him from bedroom to bathroom like a silky, red shadow, so grateful for the sight of him she could not stay away. It did not do to make comparisons between this affectionate creature and Sarah, or to hope the gratitude of the one would inspire the same devotion in the other, but he made the comparison all the same with rueful humour and a slap to his own wrist. After all, he had saved them both. A pair of red-haired beauties, both in need of a champion.

Who looks after me? Malcolm thought with a sudden wave of self-pity, which he suppressed only when he saw to his horror how his eyes filled with tears in the privacy of the bathroom. Quite right to avoid mirrors: he had always been too emotional for a man, even a fat man. His father, Ernest Matthewson, had said so. Ernest had exercised the right to speak his mind since the day he had married Malcolm's mother and become the benign but tyrannical influence he was. Strange how roles altered themselves when no-one was looking. Who looked after whom these days was a moot point. Ernest Matthewson, senior partner, a man of old-fashioned principles and terrifying, irrational loyalty to clients of the firm, no matter how frightful they were, was also the indulgent employer of Malcolm's Sarah, but his powers had waned into frail irascibility in the last twelve months. Anyone serving a client like Charles Tysall deserved to be ill.

Malcolm snorted, waving his hand at the mirror. There was nothing to envy about his father's career. Ernest had the sumptuous office and the salary to match, but Malcolm felt he had a certain moral advantage. It was not one which could ever make him oblivious to Ernest's good opinion. Malcolm loved Ernest, Ernest loved Malcolm; they were stuck with

it, even if they rowed like enemies to hide an attachment they simply could not avoid.

He might despise my relative poverty, Malcolm thought, but at least I am licensed to tell the truth. And at least I can sneak my dog into my office without anyone worrying about the furnishings.

Nor did he have to care today about the fact that it was too late and getting later, and he did not give a damn. The dog's lead evaded detection. Must be in Sarah's flat, that's where it was; she had been the last to walk the beast. Malcolm stroked the spaniel's silky head, felt the warmth behind the ears, the thump of her tail. At least there was some consistency in his life.

They walked downstairs from his spacious attic in the huge Victorian terrace on the side of the park, round to the front door, inside with the key and up one floor to another door where a small brass plate announced 'Sarah Fortune'. Somehow in the intervening year, they had lived between the two places, tending more towards his, especially in the early days. That was during the time when her flat was being cleared up, to put it mildly. The contrast between then and now hit him again as he opened the door. There was a new mirror, winking at the end of the hall, new carpet on the floor, a mushroom colour in a hall lined with pictures, all slightly dusty. He could never forget what had happened here, even on a fine morning like this when the sunlight sanitized the memory.

The trust of the dog was infinite. She never growled on crossing the threshold: it was Malcolm who did that. She should have murmured at least, he thought resentfully; she was badly hurt in here, but then she has nothing of which to be ashamed. She does not suppress memory; she simply forgets everything but the next meal. It was a knack Sarah should learn too.

There were a few new marks on the clean paint by the kitchen door. Spilt coffee, tribute to Sarah's domestic carelessness, at odds with her flair for making things beautiful, translating junk into elegance. Coffee stains, or wine, not blood. Malcolm was beginning to understand that he might be stuck with the memory of the blood, however much he encouraged it to fade. Each time he came here he felt as if he was retracing his own fleeting steps, following the dog up to this apartment where she had led him twelve months ago, inspired by her mischievous curiosity. Disobedient dog, running amok at the end of a late-night run, cannoning into the insecure front door, up the stairs, leaving him no choice but to follow, cursing her.

No, don't remember it. Memories were for old men. Past accidents, old horrors, should be recognized, of course, put into the scheme of things so that life could continue as soon as possible. Too much analysis only increased the weight of the baggage and both he and Sarah carried plenty of that already. Malcolm sighed, resigned to a mental ritual. OK, run through the facts on record, including those which embarrassed him personally, as if explaining them briefly to a stranger, then put them back on the shelf where they belonged. It was his way of dealing with it. So. Charles Tysall, Dad's super-rich handsome bastard of a client, got involved with Sarah, whom he met through Dad's firm. No, correction, not involved, obsessed. Had this fixation, see, with red hair. Sarah gives him the cold-shoulder, so he breaks in here one night, waits for her. There is a fight in which a large mirror is broken. Sarah falls on the glass, has lots of nasty little injuries all over, though not on her face, God knows how. Led by his daft dog, he, Malcolm, had intervened and pursued the attacker out into the park, and this was the bit he most loathed to recall. Bringing the man down like a Rott-

weiler after cattle, hitting him far too hard and too long for the purpose, and, oddly, enjoying it. Malcolm hated violence, had never known he was so capable of it.

It had been a cruel way to bring Sarah into his life, he would concede for the record, but since he loved her with every ounce of his sinewy frame, the means of this savage introduction were less important than the ends.

The dog's lead was in the kitchen. Malcolm found it and then took a quick tour of the rooms, guilty again, looking for the negative, for some signs that she was not packing up and leaving. She could not do that now, not with all the exclusive knowledge which bound them together. Knowledge of Charles Tysall, not only as that rich and privileged business-man-thief, whom Malcolm had pursued with all the futility of the law long before it was made apparent to Sarah what else he was. Bugger the past. It was the future Malcolm wanted.

The dog froze at Malcolm's flank, leaning against him. Red hairs from her long coat already decorated the trousers of his suit. Footsteps, upstairs in the flat above, harmless, unhurried. They both relaxed. The dog shook herself; he felt inclined to copy. Dog lived in the present; so should they all. Charles Tysall was dead. He might have mutilated his own wife and driven her to suicide, then turned his attentions to Sarah, but now he was dead. Dead as an old potato chip.

That was all right, then. Perhaps all himself and Sarah needed was a holiday. Brisk sea air, that sort of thing.

I am only an ordinary man, Malcolm told himself. An ordinary man who tries to be decent and honourable. I should not have memories like this, complications like this. I only want to love and be loved.

Back outside in the sunshine of summer, crossing the park to the road, he made himself think of sea air, but his thoughts only shifted back. That was the problem with reliving memory, even in the tidy way he did: it infected everything, like rancid oil in cooking. He could not think of sun, sea and sand without thinking back to Charles. How the man who was the closest thing to evil he had ever encountered went on being so, even in death. Only Charles Tysall, moving unit of harm, could choose to despoil some innocent seaside resort by committing suicide in it, just as his wife had done. Had the man never heard of preservation?

Life, Malcolm thought to himself, is a bitch. If he could ever have thought of Sarah as a bitch, it would be easier.

Watching the dog lolloping away, he began to laugh. The laughter was the result of suddenly seeing himself introducing Sarah to others. This is my wife Sarah. We met in the hall, beneath the mirror, through an extraordinary set of coincidences you would find impossible to believe and so do I.

The word 'wife' stuck in his throat. He wanted to be a husband; take this wonderful creature and make an honest woman of her. Laughter ceased. Oh yes, he told himself, you can lead a dream to water, but you cannot make it drink.

Sarah Fortune had been taught by her mother never to complain. She had also been warned that there was an element of indecency in her nature; that her energy was a nuisance and that a woman's lot was not happy. Parental ambition had amounted to a kind of Calvinism, a constant push in the direction of career over frivolity which dictated that Sarah keep her nose to the grindstone and her red hair in ugly plaits until she was qualified to earn a living. With the double standard of a mother, Sarah's had still wanted her