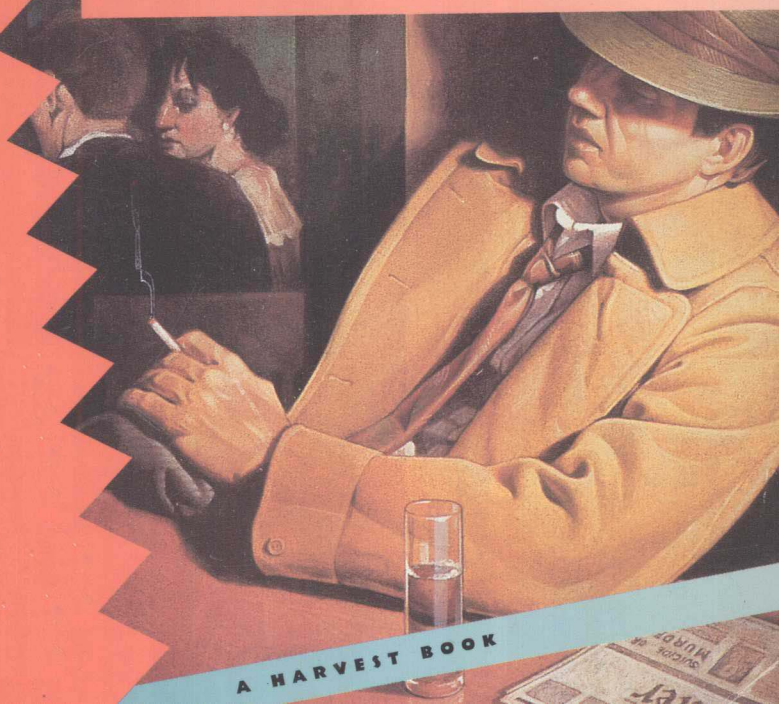


WILLIAM

McILVANNEY

STRANGE LOYALTIES



A HARVEST BOOK



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A B C D E

STRANGE LOYALTIES

Other Laidlaw mysteries by
William McIlvanney

Laidlaw

The Papers of Tony Veitch

For Liam

Here's a nice jungle: glades of trust
Disturbed by parakeets of lust,
Pools of deceptive calm where need
Bathes among crocodiles of greed.

A man's life of any worth is a continual allegory—
and very few eyes can see the mystery.

—John Keats

ONE

1

I woke up with a head like a rodeo. Isn't it painful having fun? Mind you, last night hadn't been about enjoyment, just whisky as anaesthetic. Now it was wearing off, the pain was worse. It always is.

I didn't want this day. Who sent for it? Try the next house. I burrowed into the pillow. It was no use. A sleepless pillow. What was it they called that? Transferred epithet? My teachers. They taught me everything I don't need to know.

I got up and went on safari for the pain-killers. There weren't many places they could be. The bedroom was unlikely. That left the sitting-room, the small kitchen, the hall and the bathroom. The hall was out. There was nowhere there to keep them, unless I had cunningly hidden them under the carpet. The places were the kitchen or the bathroom. Deductive reasoning. Lucky I was a good detective.

After checking cupboards that held old razor blades and more dishes than I would ever use, I found the magic bottle. It was in the sitting-room behind the tiers of the change I hated keeping in my pockets. I got a glass of water and took two pills, feeling they wouldn't be enough – like sending in two rookie policemen to quell a riot.

I came through and sat in the sitting-room. As memory returned, I wished it wouldn't, because I did it again. I started to cry. For about a month now I had been doing that. The day would begin with tears. Maybe other people did exercises. I cried. Nothing dramatic, no wracking sobs. Just quiet and remorseless tears. They wouldn't let up on me. The good thing was they didn't last long.

After a few minutes they stopped. I wiped my face with my hand and stood up. At least today was the day I had decided I would start to do something about my tears. One of the two people I'd told of my intention had said I was crazy. But I've

never said I was sane – just no more mad than anybody else I see around me. When we breakfast on reported mayhem and go to sleep having ingested images of national catastrophe like Mogadon, don't anybody call me crazy.

I ran a bath and lay in it as if it were a ritual of cleansing more than physical. Heal me, holy water, and prepare me for the things I have to do. I don't think it worked but the hot water helped my head. As the whisky sweated out of me, the miasma round my mind drifted up and mingled with the rising steam like mist clearing.

Maybe Brian was half-right. I wasn't crazy. But maybe I was daft. We had a corpse. But did we have a crime? If we did, it wasn't one you would find in the statutes. But then I didn't believe in the statutes too much anyway. Mr Bumble got it wrong. The law isn't an ass. It's a lot more sinister than that. The law is a devious, conniving bastard. It knows what it's doing, don't worry. It was made especially to work that way.

I've seen it go about its business too often – all those trials in which you can watch the bemusement of the accused grow while the legal charade goes on around him. You can watch his eyes cloud, panic and finally silt up with surrender. He doesn't know what the hell they're talking about. He can no longer recognise what he's supposed to have done. Only they know what they're talking about. It's their game. He's just the ball.

I've been at trials where I had put the man in the dock and, fifteen minutes into the thing, I wanted to stand up and speak for the defence. 'Listen,' I've wanted to shout, 'I caught this man on the streets. That's where he lives. You lot ever been there?' But they went on with their private party, listening to precedents like a favourite song, playing word games, applauding one another. Occasionally, the voice of the accused will surface among the gobbledygook, small and often wistful and usually sounding strange, like a Scottish accent heard in the midst of Latin. It's a glimpse of pathetic human flesh, freckled and frail, seen through a rent in ermine robes, but quickly covered. Who's this interrupting our little morality play? He doesn't even know the script.

Those judges, I thought, as the water cooled around me. I do a lot of my thinking in the bath. Maybe that was one advantage of having rented an apartment with no shower. They lived as close to the world as the Dalai Lama. Never mind having little understanding of the human heart, they often didn't have much grasp of the daily machinery of the lives they were presuming to judge. Time and again the voice had quavered querulously down from Mount Olympus, asking the question that stunned: 'A transistor? What exactly do you mean by that?' 'UB40? Is that some kind of scientific formula?' ('Not a formula, Your Honour. A form. An unemployment form.') 'An unemployment form? And what is that?'

Did you have to check in your head at the door when you joined a club? Under those wigs, what strange heads mulled in port and pickled in prejudice?

'Lawyers,' I said to the ceiling above my bath. Who could trust them? They stuff their wallets with crimes and declare themselves the pillars of society. Their fees are often fiscal robbery but who can nail them but themselves? 'A brilliant lawyer' was a phrase I had often heard. That was all right if all you meant was an ability to play legal games. But what did that mean? Intelligence as a closed circuit. Intelligence should never be a closed circuit. Take them off the stage that is a law court, where the forms are all pre-set, and a lot of them wouldn't know tears from rain.

I suppose you could say I was getting disillusioned with my job. I got out of the bath and pulled the plug, wiping away any suggestion of a tide-mark as the water drained. That was a technique I had learned since being on my own. It made the bath easier to clean. (Laidlaw's Handy Home Hints For Single Men: first edition in preparation.)

I towelled myself. Naked, I didn't like the softening belly. It wasn't so bad with the clothes on. And besides, among others you usually pulled it in a little, put on the corsets of vanity. In the bathroom I just contemplated my navel and found it a bigger subject than I wanted it to be. Ah, those now gone days when I could eat a house and drink a brewery and still have a stomach like a plank nothing could warp.

Intimations of mortality bulged under the towel. Time was I seemed forever. Time was time hardly was. My life was an unknown continent and I was its only explorer. And what had I discovered? Eh, well, eh, life is . . . Thingmy. Give me another few years and I'll have it sussed. But how many years were left? These days they passed so quickly. It was as if you stopped to mend a fuse and when you looked up another year had gone.

I remembered reading somewhere a theory about why time passed more quickly the older you got. The gist of it was this: when you're ten, a year is a tenth of your life; when you're forty, a year is a fortieth of your life. A fortieth is a lot less than a tenth. I was over forty. I didn't try to calculate the decimal points. I just agreed with the principle.

But it was strange. Awareness of my own mortality gave me a boost. A shot of psychic adrenalin pumped through me and blew the last remaining tendrils of mist out of my head. If you stayed true to your experience, you needn't fear age. It was only bringing you closer to understanding. I had always wanted understanding. Let's see if we could find it.

I put on a clean pair of underpants. From small beginnings . . . I put a new blade in the razor. I squeezed shaving soap onto my palm from the dispenser. I soaped my cheeks, my chin, my upper lip. I had done away with the recent moustache. It made me look too much like a policeman – standard issue, along with the identity-card. I looked into the small round mirror like a porthole and a floating face stared back at me, bearded white. By the time I was as old as I looked in the mirror, I hoped I would have the wisdom to match the appearance.

As I shaved the fuzziness of my face into definition there came into focus with my jaw the time ahead, hardening round the purpose I had given it. I had one week. It was a month since the bad thing had happened and it had taken me that time to win a week away from police work, at least from official police work. I had earned my busman's holiday.

It would be a kind of investigation, but my kind. Since I had been a policeman in Glasgow, the expression just about every superior had used to describe me, as if they were reading

from my file, was 'maverick'. It had become equivalent to some kind of rank: Jack Laidlaw, Maverick. Well, they were right. I *was* a maverick. They didn't know how much. If I wasn't fond of lawyers, I was less fond of policemen. For years I had been working against the grain of my own nature.

How often had I felt I was working for the wrong people? How often had I felt that the source of the worst injustices wasn't personal at all but institutional and fiscal and political? It was the crime beyond the crime that had always fascinated me, the sanctified network of legally entrenched social injustice towards which the crime I was investigating feebly gestured. 'When a finger points at the moon,' a Paris graffito had once said, 'the fool looks at the finger.' Maybe I had been watching fingers for long enough.

All my prevarications had come home to roost, my personal harpies to foul my sense of my own worth and mock the work I had been doing. If I was a detective, let me detect now. It was time to put such skills as I had into overdrive.

For I was faced with a death I *had* to understand. It was a death I had to investigate, not for police reasons, though perhaps with police methods. Investigator, investigate thyself. A man was dead, a man I had loved perhaps more than any other.

Nobody had said 'crime'. But that dying seemed to me as unjust, as indicative of meaninglessness as any I had known. And I had known many. For he had been so rich in potential, so much alive, so undeserving – aren't we all? – of a meaningless death. I knew.

I should know. He was my brother.

The doorbell rang. The sound changed the meaning of my thoughts. It's one thing to psych yourself up inside your own head, to threaten to bring experience to book in your own mind. It's another to translate the mental vaunting into event, to bring the intensity of your feelings against the facts and see what results. It's the difference between the gymnasium and the championship fight. The bell said, 'Seconds out'. You're on your own. The proximity of someone else only made it clearer.

I padded barefoot to the door with shaving-soap round my ears and on my upper lip. In the doing of it, I had a small revelation: a dangerous world. This was how we lived now. The flat I had rented was in an old, refurbished tenement. When it was built, it had a door on the street that anyone could enter. Now it was different. The outside door was locked. You pressed a bell. Someone lifted a phone. If they knew who you were, they pressed a buzzer. You were allowed inside and came to their door. They checked you through a peep-hole. If you passed the test, they opened the door.

This was a tenement on the edge of Glasgow, not the Castle of Otranto. Anyone who lived here couldn't have much worth stealing. Maybe a video. We had become afraid of ourselves. There was a time a man or woman would have taken pride in being able to open the door to anyone. What was happening to us?

Was even this relevant to my brother's death? The way I felt, anything might be. I put my hand on the phone. Come in, strange world. And I'll be watching you more closely than I ever have before. I lifted the phone.

2

'Hullo?'

'Hullo. Jack?'

It was Brian Harkness. It would be, as early as this. My recent condition had brought out the social worker in Brian.

'Okay, Brian.'

I pressed the release buzzer and left my door open. I was finishing shaving when Brian came in and closed the door. He came through and sat on the edge of the bath.

'Aye, Brian.'

'Jack.'

He was giving me a look that should have had a stethoscope attached.

'How you doing?' he asked. 'You been on the stuff?'

'Define your terms.'

'You been on the stuff?'

'Brian. I get it on prescription.'

Jolly wit: the balancing pole with which we walk the tight-rope. I was rinsing the last of the soap off my face.

'Jesus, I worry about you. What you doin' to yerself? Nobody knows where you are any more. You're as popular with the squad as a ferret in a rabbit warren. The only time we see you's on the job. Then you disappear. To this?'

He was looking round. I was drying my face.

'Brian,' I said. 'Why are you not wearing an ample floral frock?'

'What?'

'You're going to play at being my mother, dress for the part.'

'Piss off and listen once in your life, will ye?'

'Ma mammy never spoke like that. Times have changed.'

'Jack. You'll have to pull yourself together.'

'She spoke like that, though. If you really want to be mother, make us something to eat. I have to get ready.'

He stared at me the way relatives sometimes look at patients in a hospital, when they think they're not being observed. But I'm not a detective for nothing. I saw that expression that wonders if the patient knows how bad he really is. He shook his head and went through to the kitchen.

I was glad to see him go for the moment. It took the pressure off. The truth was I wasn't feeling too sure of myself. As I started to comb my wet and rumpled hair, I absorbed, in a kind of delayed action, the things he'd been saying, the reality of his concern, the valid reasons for it. The snarled hair tugged at the comb and some came out on it but I didn't miss it. At least my hair was staying. It seemed as thick as ever and had no grey. But if my hair was there to remind me of who I had been, what else was?

Brian was right. My life was one terrible mess. Miguel de Unamuno had written something that applied to me, if I could think what it was. I read quite a lot of philosophy in a slightly

frenetic way, like a man looking for the hacksaw that must be hidden somewhere, before the executioner comes. It was something about continuity. Unamuno says something like: if a man loses his sense of his own continuity, he's had it. His bum's out the window. Sorry, Miguel, if I'm not quoting accurately.

That was me all right. I had lost the sense of my own continuity. I was improvising myself by the day. I didn't know who I was any more. The life I had thought I was constructing had fallen apart. Family, for example. I had always thought that was the lodestone of my life. Now I was irrevocably separated from Ena and I saw my children by appointment. My relationship with Jan lived in a kind of sensual limbo – a free-floating bed that wasn't anchored to any social structure. Beyond the act of love, I wasn't sure what I had to offer her. I survived by a job I doubted every day. And just when I thought I might be going under, when I needed every scrap of confirmation of life's meaningfulness I could get, my brother, who in my worst times had seemed more substantial to me than myself, my brother had walked into a random car. Or was it so random?

Something in me had to believe it wasn't. I wasn't saying it was suicide. What was I saying? I didn't know. Maybe part of what I was saying was 'guilt'. Every time someone I love has died, I have felt guilty. I didn't spend enough time with them, I didn't appreciate them fully when they were here, I hadn't given enough to them.

But the guilt, I believed wildly enough, wasn't just mine. I've always been generous in that way. In just about every case I've investigated, I've wanted to implicate as many people as I could, including myself. My ideal dock would accommodate the population of the world. We would all give our evidence, tell our sad stories and then there would be a mass acquittal and we would all go away and try again. (But don't tell the Commander of the Crime Squad that I said that.)

Scott, my dead brother, had become the focus for that manic feeling, so long suppressed in me. I needed his death to mean more than it seemed to mean. If the richness of the life in him