PENGUIN NEW WRITERS

FRANK SMITH

BROTHERS' KEEPERS

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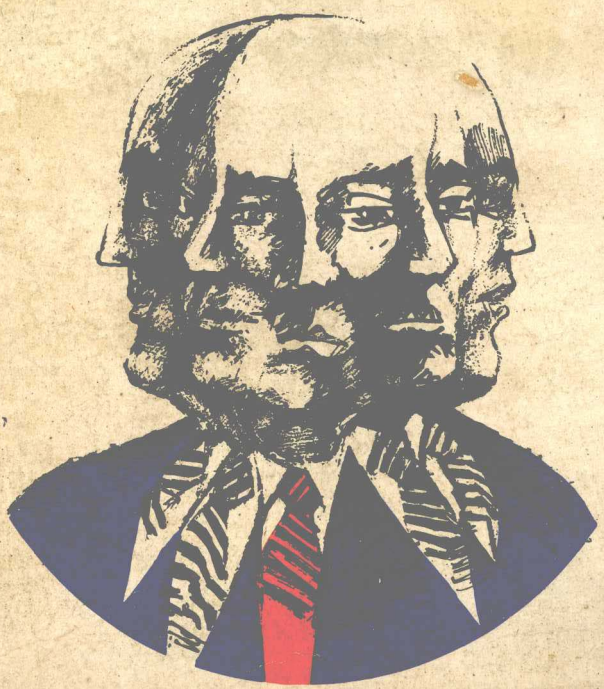

Penguin Book 2739
Brothers' Keepers

Frank Smith was born in London in 1928. He joined the Royal Navy when he was sixteen and subsequently worked as a seaman, sheepfarmer and journalist in France, Belgium, Holland and Australia. He wrote *Brothers' Keepers* while completing his honours degree in psychology at the University of Western Australia. He has since received a Ph.D. degree from Harvard University and is currently working with an educational research laboratory in California. Frank Smith is co-editor with Professor George A. Miller of *The Genesis of Language*, a book on the development and psychology of language. He is married to an artist and has three children.

Frank Smith

Brothers' Keepers

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Part One

In West Tanners it was Christmas Eve. The new snow hung heavily in the trees, fusing all the fairy lights. The old slush lay wet and deep in the streets, keeping children from the windows of the television shops. Father Christmas had left the stores, removed his beard and in two dozen homes was arguing with his wife.

In San Francisco sixty-three people died in an air crash. In Hiroshima a time-worn tout entertained tourists with his radiation scars. In Rotterdam a drunken farmer drowned in four inches of water. In Melbourne a degenerate policeman won a £10,000 lottery. In Korea an army truck killed a four-year-old girl. In Monaco an eighty-seven-year-old woman inherited a fleet of oil tankers. In Quito Siamese twins were born. In Vladivostok an acrobat broke his neck. In Bari a boy of fifteen raped his grandmother. In Accra an artist finished a mural. In Karachi an executioner returned from holiday.

The Pope dozed, the Queen dined, the President slept, the Commissar turned over.

In West Tanners the Rev. Lionel Maltby slurched his motor scooter through the slush, pursuing the bells the bells the bells.

Hark the herclick hark the herclick hark the herclick.

A besotted sexton lay on a narrow ledge in the belfry, nose close to the gramophone turntable.

Hark the herclick hark the herclick hark the herclick.

The skid of the scooter awoke him and he jogged the arm of the pickup. Glory to the new-born. He leaned back against the wall. With the bells ringing true the rev. might not bother to stop. Put shoes in slush, shoulder to door, bare head in draught, enter church, make obeisance, clamber ladder, forty-seven steps.

The sexton shifted his weight, and his elbow caught the neck

of the whisky bottle, centre of gravity sadly lowered. The bottle fell, catching the Rev. Maltby behind the ear on the thirty-second step.

As the sexton ran from the church the bells rang out, Christ and sinclick Christ and sinclick Christ and sinclick.

'I swear by Almighty God that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.'

'Your honour, may I suggest that witness stands on a chair to give his evidence?'

The coroner agrees. Witness stands on the chair, face unchanged.

'Your name is Clarence Edwin Maltby?'

'It is.'

'You are thirty-two years of age?'

'I am.'

'Unmarried?'

'I am.'

'And of no fixed address?'

'Correct.'

'You are by profession a circus entertainer?'

'I am a dwarf.'

'And you are the brother of the deceased?'

'I am.'

'He had no other living relatives?'

'Not as far as I know.'

'Your parents died when you were children?'

'That is correct.'

'And you were brought up by an aunt?'

'My brother was. He was five years older than me. I was sent to a very kind institution – the circus.'

'I believe you did not see your brother very much after that time?'

'We saw each other only once, nine years ago.'

'Did you exchange many words?'

'None.'

'How was that?'

'The circus was in town. I went to my brother's sermon, and

he paid to see me in the sideshow. We had nothing very much to say to each other.'

'I understand you identified the body of your brother?'

'I did.'

'How were you able to do so, since you had seen him only once since you were a child?'

'I have always felt close to him. We exchanged Christmas cards. With little messages. I learned a lot by what he did not say.'

'But how could you identify his body?'

'He had a birthmark over his heart, like an anchor. I have one the same.'

'Have you any idea why anyone should want to harm your brother?'

'He was a priest.'

'I fail to follow you. Did you know of a specific threat against him?'

'No. But I suppose that by putting himself on show as a priest he was taking a position, so he would be vulnerable to attack by people who were not priests.'

'I do not see why the mere fact that he was a priest should make him vulnerable to attack. Quite the reverse, I should have thought.'

'Why? I do not see why the mere fact that I am physically unusual should make me vulnerable to attack, but this frequently happens. Many people come to the sideshow, not to satisfy curiosity, which I understand, but to give themselves release in some strange way. They see my colleagues and me sitting there, each with his own particular difference – deformity, you may call it – and they become quite vicious. Perhaps they are offended, or feel insecure, or perhaps even they begin to worry that it is they, the onlookers, who are the freaks. I don't know. But they don't like us, these people who pay to look at us. They swear at us and spit at us. They laugh at us in a hysterical sort of way. I think we make them feel ashamed, and it angers them. Sometimes I think that it is our dignity which offends them, our acceptance. They don't like us to behave like them. That is why the circus is always trying to get us to do tricks like performing animals. We resist this, my

colleagues and I, and I think it annoys people. They seem to object to the fact that we are basically the same as they, and they as us.'

The coroner interrupted. This was all very interesting but irrelevant to the inquiry. Had the witness any concrete evidence as to why his brother might have been murdered, if indeed that was the case?

The dwarf had nothing to say, and was allowed to get down from the chair and leave the witness-box. He sat quietly among the strangers in the court.

DRUNK OR FRIGHTENED

Sergeant P. P. Creed, stationed at the West Tanners police station, said on oath that at 7.43 p.m. on 24 December he had received a telephone message from a public pay box telling him to go to St Faith's Church. The caller did not give his name.

Witness had gone directly to the church in a police vehicle and had found the side door open. Inside the church, lying near the foot of a ladder leading to the bell tower, was the body of a man whom he recognized as the Rev. Lionel Maltby. He had apparently been hit over the head with a bottle, broken pieces of which were scattered around. There was no one else in the church.

Deceased appeared to have died a violent death, yet there was no apparent reason why anyone should have wanted to kill him. There was no sign of theft, nor had there been a struggle. Apart from his time at college, deceased had lived in the district for over thirty years, and was widely liked.

The police were looking for the sexton, a Mr Joseph Carley, who had last been seen by his landlady at 5 p.m. that afternoon, when he had set out to play the gramophone recordings of Christmas bells from the church tower. The record was still playing, with the needle stuck in a groove, when witness arrived in the church. He had climbed to the belfry to switch the gramophone off. He had seen no sign of anything suspicious up there.

MISSING CHURCH OFFICER

Witness said that no trace had been found of Mr Carley in the four days since the Rev. Mr Maltby's death, although the sexton's description had been circulated to all stations and was broadcast on the radio and TV on 25 December. Mr Carley, a fifty-three-year-old widowed clerk, had no children and lived in lodgings. He had not mentioned any plans to go away for the holidays, in fact he had promised his landlady to return for supper.

He had been a member of the church since the death of his wife, eleven years previously. He had taken to drinking rather heavily in the past few months. Deceased had apparently discussed this with him on several occasions, but there was no evidence of ill-feeling between the two men. Mr Carley's explanation, according to his landlady, was that he had lost faith in his church and his work.

Deceased was by no means a wealthy man. In addition to his stipend he had only a very small income from a couple of books of sermons which he had published and which were very popular in the ecclesiastical profession. The rectory at St Faith's was disused, and deceased had lived in lodgings for twenty years since the death of his aunt. He was not married, and his savings, income and effects would pass on to his younger brother, Mr Clarence Maltby.

CIRCUS MIDGET

The police had found Mr Clarence Maltby in a northern seaside resort, where he was appearing as an exhibit in a circus. He used the title of 'Homer, the intellectual midget'. Homer – Mr Clarence Maltby, that was – had arrived in West Tanners just before the inquest opened, and had indicated his willingness to remain there at least until police inquiries were completed. In view of the incomplete state of the evidence, witness asked for an adjournment to allow the police time to make more inquiries.

After medical evidence had been given that the Rev. Maltby had been in sound condition and had died almost

instantaneously as a result of a fractured skull, the coroner acceded to the police request and adjourned the inquest provisionally for fourteen days.

He requested Mr Clarence Maltby to stay in the vicinity of West Tanners until the mystery of his brother's death had been solved. Permission was given for the body to be disposed of.

West Tanners was once part of the countryside, and a few remnants of its rural past can still be found, although the long tongue of the metropolis has licked the old village in, to be masticated and transformed until it can now no longer be differentiated from the pulp which surrounds it, the residential pulp on which the metropolis feeds and grows.

There is, incidentally, no North, South or East Tanners, the district's name deriving from the old village's geographical relationship with what was once Tanners Brook. According to the local historian, the brook itself was named after a tanner who had used its waters for his work during the reign of Edward III. The brook has now been decently diverted into cement piping and is part of the West Tanners sewerage system. It was in the news only recently when a four-year-old boy climbed down into it through a manhole which had been inadvertently left open. His body was found a week later, at the sewerage farm.

West Tanners still boasts a village green, although it is now covered with paving and tarmac and serves a useful function as a parking area for cars. The only green to be seen there today is the paint on the railings of the public convenience, one of the three prominent structures in the middle of the area. The second is the district's war memorial, a weathered granite obelisk on the steps of which young and old alike often sit to chat or watch the crowds go by. Completing the trinity is a white signpost, which indicates the direction and distance of a number of other places.

The four sides of the green can fittingly be taken to symbolize the four aspects of life on which West Tanners' physical and moral well-being are founded – art, commerce, industry and the past. On the eastern side are the district's links with

earlier times, the Church of St Faith's, the old village hall (now completely renovated and used for whist drives and ratepayers' protest meetings) and the cemetery. With the rapid increase of population since the district acquired status as an industrial suburb of the metropolis, fears have arisen that the latter would soon be overcrowded, but a wise council has permitted the installation of a crematorium which is becoming well patronized. The old village inn stands on a corner here, now brought completely up to date.

On the opposite side of the green is the cultural centre of the district. The municipal library is very popular, especially the children's section, and an annexe has been added to house the district's growing art collection. Already a number of prints of old masters have been purchased or donated, and an energetic committee strives to attract the interest of the busy local residents. It has recently sponsored a series of recorded chamber music concerts in the gallery, several of which have been quite well attended, particularly by members of the old folks clubs. Next to the library and art gallery is the technical college, busy every day and evening with courses ranging from domestic science and upholstery to astronomy and foreign languages. On Saturday evenings, square dances are held in the large hall.

Modern dancing is catered for in the glittering Kasbah ballroom on the northern side of the green, next to the popular Eldorado cinema, which claims to show the latest American releases as soon as they have finished their run in the metropolis. These two amenities are situated in the commercial and professional section. Here there are flourishing departmental stores where the wealth of the industrial nations of the world can be available to every local resident on the lowest rates of deposit and weekly repayment. There are large shops and small shops, efficient dining-rooms where a three-course meal can be had within twenty minutes, and intimate coffee bars, each with an atmosphere of its own, achieved with the subtlest effects of modern interior decoration. There are exclusive model salons where copies of the latest fashion creations of Paris and New York can be obtained, and, more importantly perhaps, there are the professional offices in which the doctors

and dentists, solicitors and psychologists, brokers and estate agents make their skilled services available.

The fourth side of the green is dominated by the imposing façade of West Tanners' greatest acquisition, its industry. The factory of F.J.C. & K. Co. Ltd is the largest of its kind on the outskirts of the metropolis. It is calculated that it employs no less than 58·7 per cent of all residents of West Tanners who work outside the metropolis, and it contributes in rates alone 64·8 per cent of the district's total income. The wall around it, with its tall, cast-steel gates, extends the whole length of the longest side of the green. Its machinery is never silent, its fires never die. The fluorescent lights in its acres of workshops and offices have no switches, for they are never extinguished. The younger generation of West Tanners men and women probably cannot remember a day when the purified smoke from its seventeen noble chimneys, landmarks for miles around, did not soar majestically above the district.

F.J.C. & K. Co. Ltd is of course a part of the great D.C.W. combine, which has grown in barely eighty years from a tiny enterprise in a blacksmith's shop to Europe's biggest industry. Much of the present capital has come from the parent company, the gigantic P.F. & L. Corporation in America, but there are also close connexions with the K.M.Z. cartel in Germany and the amazing M.M.T.M.M.H. group of industries in Japan. Experts come from all over the world to West Tanners to visit its famous industry, often spending weeks or months of research there to study just one small link in its many chains of processes. Truly it can be said that Western Europe would not be what it is today had the F.J.C. & K. works not made its mighty contribution.

The green and its four surrounding areas are the heart of modern, thriving West Tanners. Beyond them, all around them, are the homes of the workers, extensive housing estates and towering blocks of flats, fully serviced with kindergartens, schools, hospitals, community centres, railway stations, wide roads and sporting and recreational amenities. As the local historian says in the council's guide book, 'This thriving community which is West Tanners today, this monument to modern prosperity and industry, is not the product of one

man, one generation or one age. It is an imposing stage in the march of progress, a significant plateau in the development of a district from the most humble of beginnings. West Tanners is a symbol of what man can achieve when he subordinates his own, personal desires to the better growth of the community as a whole. It is a colossus of organized coordinated effort, the realization in brick, stone and steel of our district's proud motto – Forward Through Adversity.'

*

'Call me Homer.'

The dwarf, blinking as he stepped out into the winter sunlight, had been approached by a solid healthy woman dressed in ostentatious mourning, dabbing at dry eyes with a black-edged handkerchief. She was one of nature's eternal landladies, so well-preserved that it was impossible to tell exactly how far behind her middle age had been left. She exhibited the traditional tight-lipped repressed benevolence of her kind, the tantalizing suggestion of a generous heart which has allowed a practical business mind to get the better of it, a muttering implacability which rumbles with the perpetual grumble of moral, marital and economic worry.

'Mr Maltby,' she said, 'could I please have a word with you?' She had a rough brown paper parcel under her arm, like a bundle of washing.

'Call me Homer – and let us sit on this grave,' he replied. 'You will feel more at home.'

He walked before her like a child, leading her to one of the nearest plots in the cemetery, a few steps from the entrance of the coroner's court.

Springing nimbly into a sitting position on the tomb, he draped precisely over his stunted legs the neat blue raincoat which he carefully carried. He had no wish to hide his own peculiarity, for he had earned his living in being stared at, but he was aware of the embarrassment of others. He was not in fact a true dwarf, for his head, arms and upper body could have been those of a normal man of medium stature. He had a square, wrinkled face which was ugly but not unpleasant, watery blue eyes, a snub nose, a cleft chin and wiry wavy thick

black hair which rose from low over his brow. His teeth were yellow and good, strong as stones. The quick intelligent hands were small and stubby but not badly stunted. It was below the trunk that his body withered away, schoolboy grey serge trousers extending barely twelve inches below the dark blue blazer, almost hiding with their width the neat black shoes.

The woman looked around, then sat down beside him. Though not tall, she was still talking down to him, quietly, hurriedly.

'My name is Mrs Miscant,' she said. 'Your late brother lived in the upstairs front room of my house. The police told me you were coming so I've collected up all his papers and put them in this parcel for you. They should tell you all you need to know about him. All his clothes and books are still in the room, of course, but if you manage to get them out by the end of the week I'm sure I'll be able to persuade my husband not to worry about the four weeks' notice which we should normally expect to get before a room is vacated.'

'Could I not come to see his room?' asked Homer.

'Oh, there'll be no need for that at all, no need at all,' she said. 'Don't trouble yourself. His last lot of laundry will be back tomorrow, and I'll get all his clothes and books packed myself into a couple of empty trunks which he had and a tea chest or two. You can get a carrier to come round and pick them up on Saturday – Mr Miscant will be home all day. There's no reason why you should bother to come yourself. No reason at all.'

'I thought perhaps I might take over his room for a while. I'm a stranger in the district.'

'Out of the question, Mr Homer, I'm afraid. Out of the question. I've been much too upset by this terrible business, much too upset. It has completely upset my routine. I think I'll have to ask all my gentlemen to start looking elsewhere. I can't carry on with this kind of thing happening. It's all very well for Mr Miscant; he's at work all day. I have all the gentlemen to worry about, and only a daily woman to help me. She and Mr Miscant will have to carry on as best they may this week, anyhow. I must get away.'

'How long had my brother lived with you?'

'Been my lodger, you mean? About six years.'

'Tell me about him.'

'Oh, there's nothing to tell. I really must dash if I'm to get my bus. He paid his rent regularly and was always very quiet; no trouble at all, except for the noise of his scooter sometimes.'

'Did he have a lot of friends?'

'Only the church people. They were all very quiet. They used to have all their meetings in the vestry, so I didn't see much of them. They'll be able to help you, perhaps. Ask round at the church for them.'

'Did my brother ever go anywhere? Did he ever have any holidays?'

'Never. Hardly went out of the house, except to go to the church or some church function. I don't think he cared very much for the outside world.'

'Why not?'

'Don't ask me. I couldn't tell you. I only knew him as the lodger, really. He was no trouble. I really must get my bus.'

'Did he have any lady friends?'

'Certainly not, Mr Homer. I told you, he was very quiet. No trouble at all. What made you ask that?'

'Just something he put on his last Christmas card to me. It made me think he might be thinking of getting married.'

'Well, he said nothing to me about it, nothing at all. I would have been very surprised indeed. He must have been pulling your leg.'

Mrs Miscant got embarrassed at her slip. She stood up.

'Look, I must fly. Here are his papers. You just send round for the rest of the stuff on Saturday. Sorry I can't help you any more.'

Homer picked up the parcel from beside him on the tomb and put it on his lap. It was not very heavy.

Sergeant Creed was standing close by, waiting to talk to him.

'Don't bother to get up,' said the sergeant, when Mrs Miscant had gone. 'What was that you were saying about your brother and a lady friend just now? What did your brother put on his Christmas card? You haven't got it with you by any chance?'

'Of course I have,' said Homer. He took a card from his inside coat pocket. It had a printed one-colour line drawing of St Faith's on the front. 'He sent me the same card every year, but always put a different message inside.'

Sergeant Creed opened the card.

' "Happy Christmas and God Help Us All, from Lionel. An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign. Matthew xii. 39." ' He looked at the picture on the front, as if that might give him a clue. 'What does that mean?' asked the sergeant.

Homer shrugged.

'I don't exactly know. The year before he wrote, "In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children. Genesis iii. 16." It seemed irrelevant at the time. We'd never talked about his possible marriage in our messages, but this made me think that he had had some kind of an affair which had got out of hand. Why else should he worry about children?'

'Search me,' said the sergeant, making a note in his notebook. 'A-d-u-l-t-e-r-o-u-s g-e-n-e-r-a-t-i-o-n. No suggestion who the woman might be?'

'He had never mentioned women before. Apart from a couple of references to the virgin, of course.'

'What virgin?' asked the sergeant, notebook at the ready, nose quivering.

'The New Testament one,' said Homer.

The sergeant gave up. He put away his notebook.

'If we concentrate our inquiries on trying to trace Joe Carley, I thought you might be able to provide some evidence about your brother from his papers. If you get any clues, come round to the station straight away and let me know.'

'I don't feel very keen to do that, sergeant.'

'But you must, sir. It's your duty. Someone has killed a man, and we must do all we can to find out who and why. I'm surprised that you need me to remind you of that, seeing that it was your brother.'

'I don't think my brother would want a lot of fuss made about that.'

'That's beside the point, Mr Homer. We haven't got the