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I

THE first of the Chalmsbury blowings-up took place one warm, still night in early summer. It made the most godawful bang that had been heard in the town since a bewildered German pilot mistook the Parish Church for Lincoln Cathedral during a Baedecker raid and capped this undeserved compliment by dropping a bomb on the Food Office, a building of even less architectural merit.

Several people were awakened by the explosion, and many more by the frenzied barking of dogs that it provoked. A few disturbed sleepers got up and peered from their windows, but they saw no glow in the sky and heard no cries, no bells, no hurrying footsteps. Whatever had gone off, or up, did not seem to have left any situation worth their attention.

Only one man was sufficiently conscientious, or curious perhaps, to try and trace the source of the fearful noise that had sent him skipping out of bed, his brain flooding with confused memories of Home Guard manoeuvres, thunderstorms, and an entertaining encounter his wife once had had with a boarding-house geyser.

He was Councillor Oswald Pointer, wholesale wine merchant: a testy, bald-headed citizen of small stature but quite ferocious rectitude in matters affecting the security and convenience of the Chalmsbury ratepayer.

'This is Councillor Pointer speaking,' emerged the thin, nasal announcement from the telephone that Sergeant Worple picked up at the police station in Fen Street. The words were edged with accusation, and the sergeant, soured by night duty, prepared to be as unhelpful as he dared. 'Oh yes, sir,' he responded stiffly.

'What was that?' demanded Pointer.

'What was . . . what, sir?' By the slightest of pauses in the middle of his counter-question Worple implied that he wasn't going to believe anything that the caller might tell him.

'Why, that infernal row, of course. That great bang. What was it?'

'You heard a . . . bang, sir?' The measured, butleresque query, heavy with respectful doubt, swung back at Pointer like a sandbag.

The councillor snorted angrily and shuffled his rapidly chilling bare feet on the carpet. 'Look here, I'm telling you a damned great explosion woke me up a couple of minutes ago. I'm asking you if you know anything about it. I'm reporting it, if you like. Now do you understand?'

'Ah, you're making a report of an occurrence. Very well, sir. Will you hold the line a moment?' Worple put the telephone down on the desk with great deliberation, strolled to the far side of the room and returned slowly with a large book. 'Your full name, now, if you please, sir.'

'Pointer. Councillor Oswald Pointer. Oh, but surely. . . .'

'P . . . O . . . I . . . N . . ' The sergeant enunciated each letter as his pen scratched resolutely across the page. 'And the address, sir?'

'Fourteen, Holmwood.'

Nearly half a minute went by. Mrs Pointer, in the next bedroom, was making quavering sounds of distress in her sleep. 'Oh, shut up!' muttered her husband under his breath.

He heard Worple's satisfied 'Um' indicate that the address had been safely stowed. Then 'You said something about an explosion, sir. Perhaps you can describe it?'

'Of course I can't describe it. It was a bang. It woke me up.'

Worple remained silent a moment. 'So what you mean, sir, is that you believe an explosion occurred while you were asleep but that you didn't actually hear it.' He smiled at Pointer's gurgle of exasperation and stretched one leg. 'Is that what you wish to report, sir?'

'Look here, I didn't ring you up in the middle of the night to quibble about forms of words. For all I know it might have been a gas main blowing up. People's lives might be in danger.' His annoyance invested this spontaneous hypothesis with realism: God, we might all die in our beds for anything these cloddish policemen would stir themselves to do.

'That isn't very likely, sir, if you'll forgive my saying so,' came the patient voice from Fen Street. 'You see, coal gas – the ordinary stuff you get when you turn a tap – is largely hydrogen

and it only becomes explosive when it's mixed with the oxygen in the air we breathe. And gas mains, as a general rule, are enclosed. Air doesn't get into gas mains, sir.'

'Or, for heaven's. . . .'

'But if you've reason to believe there is a fault in your supply, you're quite right to report it, sir, even at this time of night. Would you like me to give you the number of the Gas Board escapes department?' Worple smirked tenderly at the apple he had begun to polish upon the jersey beneath his unbuttoned tunic.

The furious Pointer said nothing more, but slammed the receiver down and stood clenching and unclenching his hands. Hearing another querulous little wail from the next room, he went softly to his wife's door, opened it wide, and heaved it shut again as hard as he could. His scowl blossomed into a grin as he listened to the hoots of terror within.

A minute later, he affected a noisy and cross awakening when Amelia Pointer pattered to his bed and nervously touched his shoulder. 'Ozzy,' she whispered, 'what was that?'

'What was what?' he snarled.

She fled, squeaking apologies, out of the room.

On his way to his warehouse in the morning, Pointer overtook a neighbour, Barrington Hoole, who was sauntering slowly towards town and the optician's shop which professional dignity did not allow him to open one minute earlier than ten o'clock.

Hoole confirmed that a detonation of some kind had shaken the district during the night and added the polite hope that it had not been Mr Pointer's own personal bomb going off 'after all these years'.

The reference was to an unconfessed but famous prank in the winter of 1942, when a quite unwarranted 'Danger: Unexploded Bomb' notice had appeared overnight outside Pointer's off-licence and ruined his Christmas trade.

Pointer ignored the reminder of this misfortune and said some harsh things about the indifference of the police to public-spirited inquiries. Hoole nodded agreement while he strolled alongside, happily sniffing the June air and saluting, with benign

superiority, such of his fellow citizens as happened to be at their doors and dispensing those misleadingly affable salutations that are customary in small country towns.

The optician was a short, apple-cheeked man. His plumpness seemed to consist of compressed energy that he was at pains to keep from being transformed into unseemly haste or excitement. He had a femininely smooth chin, tucked well in, a beakish nose pinched at the bridge by new old-fashioned rimless glasses, an unlined expanse of intelligent forehead, and sparse but primly disciplined hair. His almost permanent smile might have been that of a man slightly mad, yet supremely fastidious in his eccentricity. Unlettered locals deeply respected Mr Hoole's air of donnish self-confidence, but they were suspicious and resentful of what they termed his 'sarky' sense of humour.

On the topic of explosions, Pointer found his companion somewhat unresponsive, and the subject had been abandoned by the time they emerged from East Street into the fan-shaped area of Great Market. This green-centred triangle, containing a bus stand and a maze of cattle pens, was dominated by Chalmsbury's war memorial (commemorative of 1914–18 only; an addendum relative to the more recent conflict was still the subject of somewhat acrimonious argument in the Town Council). It consisted of a short oval column, set upon a plinth, and bearing the bronze figure of a heavily moustached infantry officer in the act, apparently, of hurling a pair of binoculars at the Post Office.

At the further end of Great Market, Pointer entered his office, leaving Hoole to pursue a leisurely course through Church Street, now tight as a gut with vans and trucks and cars and droves of seemingly immortal cyclists, across St Luke's Square and over the Borough Bridge to Watergate Street. Here were his consulting rooms, as he called the cupboard-like quarters squeezed between a furniture store and the melancholy mock-magnificence of the Rialto Cinema.

Looking at some stills outside the picture house was a big, loose-legged man in a brown, chalk-striped suit. His hands, clasped behind him, looked like a pair of courting Flamborough crabs. The back of his neck had the colour and texture of peeled salami.

Hearing Hoole's key in the shop door, the man turned.

'Hello there, Sawdust.'

Hoole did not look round immediately. He knew who stood there. Only one person in Chalmsbury delighted still to use the epithet earned long years ago at the Grammar School by the boy Hoole's shameful propensity for being sick in class and requiring the attendance of the caretaker with his bucket of sawdust and his deep, contemptuous sighs. Stanley Biggadyke, his chief tormentor at that time, had a memory crammed like a schoolboy's pocket with revolting oddities and carefully preserved bits of ammunition.

'Morning, Big.' Hoole had used the pause to quell a strong temptation to outdo the other's offensiveness. He held open the door and grinned a bland, unmeant welcome.

Biggadyke stepped past him and peered round the dark little box of a shop. 'Somebody's pinched those glasses you did for me,' he announced.

'Pinched them?'

'Well they've gone, anyway. I'll have to have another pair.'

'Have you the prescription?'

Biggadyke gestured carelessly. 'I've got nothing. I thought you kept all that sort of thing.'

Hoole pulled out a drawer in a small filing cabinet and fingered quickly and delicately through cards. He eased one up. 'You had those spectacles six years ago. I'll have to test your eyes again.'

Biggadyke's mouth, which was normally kept hanging slightly open like a ventilator in the dark red heat of his complexion, shut and twisted. 'Trust you to pile on the extras. All right, Sawdust, let's get on with it. I've been waiting half the morning for you already.'

Hoole opened a door at the back of the shop and preceded Biggadyke up a short flight of narrow, carpeted stairs to the room above. Other customers, he knew, would soon be arriving for appointments but they would have to wait. He couldn't trust himself to face a postponed encounter with Biggadyke in anything like his present state of self-control.

Calmly he switched on the lamps over his charts and padded around making preliminary adjustments to pieces of equipment

that his patient eyed with sceptical amusement. 'All part of the act, eh, old man?'

The optician hummed good-humouredly. When he was satisfied with his arrangements he motioned Biggadyke to sit in the padded, upright chair facing a mirror in which the charts, behind and above the chair were reflected.

The sound of a horn, strident and imperious, penetrated the quiet, shuttered room. Biggadyke raised his head and scowled. 'That's my bloody car.' He listened a while, then relaxed. 'Kids. Carry on, Sawdust.'

Hoole opened a small, glass-fronted case. 'You can drive all right without glasses, then?'

'I can drive blindfold, cock.'

Hoole grunted and sorted out a tiny brown bottle and a dropper from the contents of one of the shelves. 'Hold your head well back and look to one side.'

Biggadyke winced as Hoole let fall four or five drops of icy liquid into each red-rimmed eye. 'Just blink them in,' said Hoole. 'They won't hurt.'

'You didn't do this last time.'

'It's better if I can take a good look inside. That's what this stuff is for. Keep your head back a few minutes.'

Hoole had good reason to remember 'last time'. It was the only occasion – since his schooldays, at least – on which he had allowed himself to fall victim to one of Biggadyke's practical jokes. The town, he supposed, was still enjoying the story. A choice fragment of the Biggadyke legend. 'He's a card, old Stan; a proper rum 'un.' How rum could one get, Hoole asked himself. He glanced, almost apprehensively, at the reading chart. The four biggest letters that formed its top line were just as they ought to be: black, solid, meaningless. Not – his scalp tingled at the recollection – as they had unaccountably appeared to prim old Mrs Garside when she had taken the chair and been asked to read them immediately after Biggadyke's last visit to his consulting rooms. Hoole looked just once more to satisfy himself that Biggadyke had not again, in an unobserved moment, superimposed that frightful four-lettered word (cunningly hand-printed in reverse for mirrored presentation) upon the chart behind him.

Half an hour later Biggadyke strode from the shop, leaving Hoole, punctiliously professional, smiling in the doorway and holding against his waistcoat his lightly clasped, white little hands.

Before crossing to where a long, pale grey sports car was parked on the opposite side of the road, Biggadyke glanced quickly to left and right. He had begun to step out for the other pavement before realizing that there had been something odd about those glimpses of Watergate Street. He looked again to the right. Yes, the roadway seemed to bulge and shimmer. He blinked hard and looked up at the buildings. They appeared normal at first, then the horizontal lines of the roofs and parapets slowly sagged and blurred. And at the edge of every solid object there was an aura of intense violet light.

Biggadyke resolutely shut his eyes and shook his head. When he again peered around him, squinting past half-lowered lids the view was more nearly in focus. He saw his car quite clearly – almost unnaturally clearly – in front of him. He reached for the door handle. To his surprise, he grasped nothing; he had to take fully two more steps before he could touch the car.

Feeling by now that mixed shame and alarm that the sudden failure of a physical function arouses in men normally robust, Biggadyke was at the same time aware of Hoole's responsibility for his condition and determined to deny him the satisfaction of seeing any evidence of it. He swung himself into the driving seat, started the engine, and, with a hideous tattoo of defiance from its exhausts, swung the big car into the centre of the road and aimed it as best he could on a mean course between the rows of curiously undulating shops.

He navigated the rest of the length of Watergate Street successfully, if only because it happened to be almost clear of traffic, the level crossing at its lower end having been closed a short time before. Only the Borough Bridge needed to be crossed; then he could turn off the square into the broad sanctuary of the White Hind's car park and rest until his sight returned to normal.

The car was on the bridge, moving slowly forward. Biggadyke knew that there would be a policeman on point duty where the bridge carriageway entered the square. He peered with painful

concentration through the windscreen and searched among the luminous, lunging shapes ahead for one that might be a blue helmet.

He was still searching when an angry shout reached him from behind. Instinctively he glanced back. There the helmet was, bobbing in the intolerable glare of the sunshine.

In that instant, the front of the sports car folded before the massive radiator of a cattle truck and Biggadyke, flung like soft clay upon his admirable multi-dialled dashboard, closed his troublesome eyes and slept.

If the noise of the collision reached the ear of Mr Hoole, ministering to his second customer of the day in the quiet, softly lighted upper room, he gave no sign of being either disturbed or elated by whatever speculation it raised in his mind. 'Head back just a fraction,' he murmured. 'That's fine.' He delicately manipulated the dropper. One little globule fell neatly into the corner of each eye of the knowledgeable Mrs Courtney-Snell, who smiled and said: 'Distending the pupil, eh, Mr Hoole?'

'Exactly!' replied Hoole admiringly. Mrs Courtney-Snell was not a National Health patient.

'Belladonna tincture,' added Mrs Courtney-Snell. 'And I'm not to worry if I cannot focus properly for an hour or two afterwards. The effect is disturbing but temporary. Isn't that so?'

'But how right you are! I can see that a mere oculist cannot pull any – ah – wool over your eyes, madam!'

Mrs Courtney-Snell condescendingly chuckled and settled back to enjoy a nice, long eye test.

In St Luke's Square the point duty policeman strode up to Biggadyke's car and wrenched open the door. At the sight of the collapsed driver he swallowed his wrath and sent the handiest intelligent-looking citizen to telephone for an ambulance.

Biggadyke recovered consciousness before it arrived. He moaned a little, and swore a great deal. The policeman, bending down to make him as comfortable as possible on the pavement, surreptitiously sniffed his breath. It was innocent of alcohol.

'Mind you,' he confided later to a colleague who had arrived to help, 'it could have been drugs. Perhaps they'll know at the hospital when they take a look at him. I wish it had been the

booze, though, like it was last time. He'd not have got away with it again.'

The second policeman shook his head. 'Don't be too sure of that, either. Big's got the luck of the devil. When they chucked out that case at the Assizes it was like giving a life-saving medal to a bloke who'd done in his granny.'

'One thing; he didn't actually kill anyone this time,' said the point duty man, and he stepped into the roadway to disperse once again the clot of inquisitive onlookers that threatened to dam what traffic could still trickle past Biggadyke's corrugated car.

He was not to know that killing was the theme of some frank observations being made at that moment by Biggadyke himself as he lay in a small private ward of Chalmsbury General Hospital.

'There's a certain little gentleman in this town, duckie,' he informed the plain young nurse whose cold fingers explored his wrist, 'who'll be coming in here soon after I leave. But, by God, you'll have your work cut out to find *his* bloody pulse!'

The nurse frowned slightly and transferred her gaze from her watch to a corner of the ceiling. Her lips made tiny counting movements. Then she replaced Biggadyke's hand on the sheet with the air of a shopper rejecting a fly-blown joint. After stooping to write on the chart clipped to the foot of the bed, she stepped to the door.

'When are you coming back to keep me warm, nurse?' Biggadyke, even in distress, was sensitive to a situation's demands upon his virility.

The girl paused in the doorway, turned, and spoke for the first time since his arrival. 'Please ring the bell if you wish to move your bowels.'

2

THE news of Stanley Biggadyke's accident was borne to the *Chalmsbury Chronicle* office in Watergate Street by the commissionaire of the Rialto, Mr Walter Grope, in hope of some reciprocal favour, such as the publication of his *Ode to St Luke's Church.*

Mr Grope had a large, harmless face like a feather bolster. So loose and widely dispersed were his features that he had difficulty in mustering them to bear witness to whatever emotion happened to possess him. His expression either was spread very thinly, like an inadequate scraping of butter over a huge teacake, or else clung in a piece to one spot.

When he smiled, which he did seldom and with reluctance, the smile wriggled painfully from the corner of his mouth, crawled a short way into the pale expanse of jowl, and there died. His frown, though more readily produced – for Mr Grope found life sad and perplexing – did not trespass beyond the very centre of his forehead. When he was surprised, his eyebrows arched like old and emaciated cats.

So long as none of these extremes seized him, his face registered blank bewilderment. He had only to stand for a moment by the kerb for some kindly woman to take his arm and try to escort him over the road. When he entered a shop he would be assumed immediately to be the seeker of a lost umbrella and assistants would shake their heads at him before he could utter a word.

Yet in spite of his appearance Mr Grope had one remarkable gift: the ability to rhyme at a tremendous rate. He practised by mentally adding complementary lines to the remarks he overheard while marshalling patrons into his cinema.

Thus: 'It's raining cats and dogs outside' (*So spake brave Marmion e'er he died*) or 'Did you remember the toffees, dear?' (*Quoth Lancelot to Guinevere*) or 'I liked that bit where Franchot Tone . . .' (*Ruptured himself and made great moan*).

This happy facility as a versifier enabled Grope to supplement the pittance he received from his employers. The arty-

crafty trade, which flourished exceedingly in Chalmsbury, found him a great asset to poker-work production. Matchbox stands, trays for ladies' combings, eggtimer brackets – these bore such masterpieces of Mr Grope's as his *Ode to the River Chal as It Passes Between the Watercress Beds and the Mighty Oil-seed Mill.* To save the poker from growing cold too often the title had been condensed to *Ode* and only the first verse quoted:

The river winds and winds and winds
Through scenery of many kinds.
It passes townships and societies,
And cattle breeds of all varieties;
But even the river must surely stand still
To admire our fine cress and Henderson's Mill!

Upon smaller articles such as stud boxes, napkin rings and egg-cosy identity discs appeared neat and edifying little slogans of Mr Grope's devising: *No Knife Cuts Like a Sharp Word* and *Mother – Home's Treasure* and *Remember Someone May Want to Use This After You.*

This being Wednesday and his morning free from supervising the Rialto's charwomen, Grope had walked abroad to contemplate man's inhumanity to man and to think up rhymes afresh. Having witnessed the collision in St Luke's Square and waited to see Biggadyke loaded into the ambulance he had retraced his steps as far as the cinema and crossed to the *Chronicle* office almost directly opposite.

Josiah Kebble, the paper's spherical editor, looked up from his desk on hearing Grope enter through the swing door. Between Kebble and his readers there was no other barrier. He considered the sociability of this arrangement well worth the occasional inconvenience of an outraged complainant bursting in upon him and demanding what he had meant by something or other.

'There's been an accident,' announced Grope.

'Has there now?' said Kebble. 'That's nice.' He regarded Grope with amiable expectation and rolled a pencil between

his palms. This produced a rhythmic clicking as the pencil struck against a thick, old-fashioned signet ring.

'That Biggadyke man has just driven into a lorry over in the Square. He's not dead, though.'

'Stan Biggadyke, you mean? The haulage bloke?'

Grope nodded ruminatively. He thought *coke . . . soak . . . bespoke . . .*

'Harry!' the editor called. A flimsy door opened in a cubicle-like contraption in one corner of the room and a pale, startled face was thrust forth. 'Can you spare a minute, old chap?' Kebble inquired of it, then, neither receiving nor seeming to expect an answer, he added: 'Just nip down to the Square. There's been a smash.'

The face disappeared and a moment later Harry slouched sadly through the office and out into the street, listing beneath the burden of a camera the size of a meat safe.

'Can't say I'm surprised, mind,' said Kebble. He glanced at the clock. 'I don't know, though. They're hardly open yet.'

Grope, who had subsided thankfully into a chair, shook his head slowly. 'It would have been a judgement,' he said, 'if he'd been taken. But his sort stays on, you know. I often wonder about it.'

'A dreadful fellow, they tell me.' Kebble said this in a tone almost of admiration.

'Ah . . .' Grope pondered. 'He used to bring young women into the three and sixes. Marched them up the stairs like a drover. Mrs Parget said she never tore tickets for the same ones twice.'

'Did he, er . . .'

'There's not a doubt of it. The usherettes got to be scared to use their torches. Think of that.'

Kebble thought of that.

'He's not a patron any more,' Grope went on.

'Really?'

'No. It's the television, I expect. Now there's an immoral invention, if you like.'

The swing door thudded open and a lank-haired youth with nervous eyes and red spike of a nose wheeled in a bicycle and propped it against the wall. 'I've got a story, chief,' he announced, gangling up to Kebble.