

**Roger Ormerod**

# **Still life with pistol**



**Constable London**

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Dedicated to my friends at The Hill Residential College, Aber-  
gavenny, because the many happy week-ends I have spent there have  
influenced the atmosphere I have tried to create. Not that I have ever  
encountered murder, assault or seduction there, nor have I ever met  
any of Bruno's students, but I'm sure that any time they like to come  
along they will be made welcome at The Hill. Those that are left.

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When Richard Patton escorts Amelia, who is an accomplished amateur artist, on a summer painting course at Fillingley Manor, he expects nothing worse than a mildly tedious fortnight. But now that he has retired and is no longer a Detective Inspector, he has plenty of time on his hands.

Right from the start, however, there are undercurrents among the group of painters and their teacher-host (who is an old friend of Patton's) which hint at violence and which make Patton uneasy. And one hot night one of the guests is murdered, shot dead in front of his unfinished painting.

Patton finds it a new experience to be on the outside of an investigation, simply another witness, his professional expertise unwanted. The habit of a lifetime, though, makes him unable to stop pondering the crime, pursuing the truth, and building facts into theories. And all his instincts tell him that the most important clue to the murderer's identity is contained on the canvas itself, a still life depicting a vase of flowers, several fallen petals – and a pistol.

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*Time to kill*  
*The silence of the night*  
*Full fury*  
*A spoonful of luger*  
*Sealed with a loving kill*  
*The colour of fear*  
*A glimpse of death*  
*Too late for the funeral*  
*This murder come to mind*  
*A dip into murder*  
*The weight of evidence*  
*The bright face of danger*  
*The amnesia trap*  
*Cart before the hearse*  
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Amelia glanced sideways at me. 'We needn't have come, Richard, if you're going to be bored.'

I made no comment, concentrating on the road surface ahead.

'If you don't fancy being here a whole fortnight, you could have said.'

I changed down for the swing into the drive. I did want to, anyway, or at least as much as I wanted to do anything else. Neither for nor against, which was the trouble. But I was annoyed that it had shown.

'It was me fixed it up,' I reminded her casually, at least hiding the annoyance. She was looking at me with that frown of doubt I'd seen so often lately. Amelia is too perceptive.

'All the same . . . I can read you like a book.'

But so many of my pages were still uncut. 'I'm quite content,' I offered. 'Besides, I did want to see what Bruno's done about the security.'

'Which'll take you about an hour.'

'More than that.'

'Well . . . so long as you're happy, Richard.'

I smiled. Happy? Yes, very happy, and had been for the past year. Just being with her and hearing her voice, that was the strength of my happiness. Content, even, if that's what you want. The trouble was, I was beginning to doubt that I did. Truth to tell, I was missing the effort, the moments of triumph, even the doubts and fears and failures. I was drifting along a level track of contentment.

'I shall haunt you,' I warned her. 'At your shoulder every minute, pointing out your mistakes. I'm going to have a grand old time.'

'You dare!'

'I might even have a go at it myself.'

‘Now *that*’s a good idea.’

‘Hah! It was a joke.’

The drive up to Fillingley Manor was narrow and rutted and the surrounding trees had been allowed to encroach. Bruno Fillingley had run out of money. Poor chap, my heart bled for him. When his father and elder brother had died together in a car crash, there he’d been in Vienna happily pigging it on a large allowance and painting away merrily with none of the desperation and poverty of the Impressionists whom he so much admired. Then suddenly he was the owner of the manor house and about eight hundred acres of woodland, river and lake and, after taxes, without a couple of tenners to rustle together for maintenance. So what had he done? He’d turned his home into a painting school. For a sum that had startled me, you could enjoy his hospitality for a fortnight, basking in country manor luxury and at the same time receiving expert tuition in whichever branch of the creative arts attracted you. You pick it, and he’d done it. He was the resident genius.

More than that, Bruno was the most expert art forger I had ever encountered. I hoped Amelia would be amused.

The invitation had been extended six months before, when I’d been to the manor, alone, to advise Bruno on security. His problem had been unique: not breaking in but breaking out. I’d been glad to do the job for nothing. Don’t tell Amelia, but it’d been a small upsurge in the interest line. But, advice over, Bruno had relaxed and we’d chatted, and I’d told him about Amelia’s artistic endeavours. She had confidence in oils but not in watercolour. So then the invitation had been made, both of us as his non-paying guests for one of his fortnight courses in June. Fine. It’d be a break, and just the sort of thing Amelia would wallow in. Between you and me, she’s better than she claims, and perhaps her expectation was as much for warming praise as for constructive criticism.

All the same, even with the excitement flushing her, she had not lost sight of my welfare. Was I perhaps regretting my retirement from the police force? Just a little bit, Richard?

I wasn’t going to admit it. I twirled the wheel, dodging the worst of the potholes, and chatted desperately.

‘Don’t be surprised when you see it. Fillingley Manor sounds very grand, but from the outside . . .’

We burst from the trees, and were confronted by the acre or so of oval, immaculate lawn, surrounded by neat gravel drive. The manor house sat beyond it, part Tudor black and white, part ugly Victorian restoration, ivy and wistaria rampantly softening the worst of it. The house spread sideways, all angles and different levels and towering slim chimneys, with hideous buttresses taking the sagging weight. The original windows were leaded, but the extensions had sash windows and heavy, curved bays. The door was a massive, studded slab of ancient black oak.

‘Richard!’ she squealed. ‘Stop! Let me look. Oh . . . it’s beautiful.’

I stopped. In the eye of the beholder, they say, so I suppose that was why Amelia was the artist and not me. All I could see was a hodgepodge of clashing styles that I found quite painful. Perhaps she was referring to the setting which was spectacular. There was a glimpse of sparkling water to one side, beyond the clock in the stable tower, and a grand sweep of birch trees around the back. In the expanse of oval lawn was one of those splendid old cedars, which must have been there when the original house was built.

There was already one car parked out on the gravel, nose in to what I knew to be the library windows.

As I drew in to park my Triumph Stag beside the blue Escort, Amelia said: ‘I wonder where the red Fiesta’s disappeared to.’

She had noticed that the lane from which we’d turned to enter the drive went nowhere. After twenty yards it was a dead end. So . . . where was the Fiesta? I shrugged, not particularly interested.

Bruno was in the doorway, all welcome and shining charm. The setting framed him well, the two massive black pillar beams of the porch at his shoulders, the studded door open behind him, the brass coach-lamp matched to his sports shirt. This was not the Bruno I’d met before, the casual businessman with the sharp thrust of efficiency behind his grey eyes. This was the Bruno you’d expect to see if you were coming to meet Bruno the RA, Bruno the landowner, your host. He was an inch or two over six feet, golden haired, an elegant forty-five or so, now in slim, beautifully-tailored chestnut slacks, silk sports shirt, and with the artistic concession of a silk scarf at the open neck. His strong bronzed hand reached forward.

'Richard. How splendid to see you again.'

A brief pressure from his fingers, nothing too effusive. Then, for Amelia, a hand to each shoulder, a twinkle from his eyes, the tiniest flicker of a smile of approval.

'And this is Amelia . . .'

Then, not one kiss but two, carefully planted one on each cheek just brushing her lips in passing, followed by the extended arms and the artist's appraisal.

'You must allow me to paint your portrait. No . . . I insist . . .'

All this was ruined, fortunately before it ran away with itself and embarrassed Amelia too painfully, by the sudden intervention, from behind Bruno, of a short, meagre man, scuttling on his hurried way out.

There would have been room to slip through between Bruno and the framing upright beam, but this was not a man with a balanced control in his life. Dark and urgent in his nervousness, his eyes hunting everywhere beneath a shock of black hair, he tripped over his own fumbling feet, caught Bruno's arm with his shoulder, and darted away towards his Escort, his toes kicking up gravel and his arms flying. He buried his embarrassment inside the rear door, and seemed to be tenderly raising a small child from the seat. His concentration held me. His entire body was unified into that single action. I realized that behind me Bruno was silent, he too fascinated.

The dark head emerged. It was not a baby he was cradling in his arms, but a plain, white vase, perhaps a foot tall. He turned, and retraced his steps, at first controlled, but then, when he realized our attention, abruptly disorganized again.

'Oh dear . . .' he said, his voice reaching into the higher register. 'Sorry. Yes. Must get this inside. You see . . .'

He stumbled towards Bruno, who moved hastily to one side, then he disappeared with a sharp pitter-patter into the darker recesses beyond the door. I stared at Bruno. He shrugged. Amelia gave a small, tight laugh.

'That was Bert Inskip,' said Bruno. 'Don't ask me . . .' He shook his head. 'A potter, he tells me. Though why he's brought it already made, instead of making it here . . . I don't know. Perhaps he'll explain.'

For a moment Bruno's practised confidence had been

shaken. It must have been the first time something like this had happened, though his painting school had been going for fifteen months. We were in the middle of a glorious June and he'd opened it the previous spring.

'But come along in,' he went on, recovering well. 'Unload your car later. I'll show you to your room and have a tray of tea sent up.' He turned and looked at me with wide, innocent eyes. 'There should have been a Mrs Inskip. Veronica, if I remember correctly. Though perhaps not his wife, otherwise why would they have asked for separate rooms?'

He seemed to intend it as a genuine and not a rhetorical question. But I was no longer a Detective Inspector. Mysteries such as this were no longer a part of my life. I put the thought behind me.

'But before we go up, Bruno, I really must show Amelia the banqueting hall.'

'Oh yes,' she said eagerly, and Bruno took her arm with proprietorial interest.

We were in the narrow entrance hall. The walls were panelled with the original dark oak, gleaming with the lustre of time. From our right rose the narrow, turning staircase which I knew led up to the grand balcony. I paused to light my pipe. Somehow it seemed appropriate there, but perhaps that was an association with fumed oak. The general impression was of solidity. Nothing creaked. Sound seemed to be absorbed without echo.

'Aren't you coming, Richard?' called Amelia from the end of the passage. 'Oh!' she gasped, as Bruno threw open the doors. I strolled casually after them, having seen it before.

The long, lofty hall ran through to the rear of the house. On the back wall the diamond-paned windows were set high, admitting only a small amount of the afternoon light. Bruno depressed a switch. The three circular iron chandeliers, gently moving on their long chains from the high, vaulted ceiling, flicked into life, artificial candles now. Originally, no doubt, rush dips had been lit, then hauled far above the blare and confusion of a high banquet, with straw on hammered earth for the floor and lurchers crawling from the corners for the tossed bones. But now the floor was stone flags. Now the huge, wide fireplace along one side wall held banked electric log fires. But

still the vaulted beams were there. The balcony, originally a minstrels' gallery at the far end, was now extended round four sides of the hall.

'Your room,' Bruno was saying, 'is above our heads, along the front balcony. You can't see the door from here.'

Amelia was saying nothing. As I had been, she was overwhelmed. Slowly she wandered round, pausing at the suit of armour (not a family heirloom, Bruno had told me, but Chinese), staring at the crossed halberds over the fireplace (Persian, Bruno claimed) and finally transfixed by the Reynolds painting of a lady in a scarlet dress, which took up a lot of the panelled wall.

'You own a Reynolds?' she asked, standing back from it.

Bruno smiled. I said: 'Look at the lace, the hands, the fan.'

'It is a Reynolds,' she claimed. 'I've seen one like it in the National Gallery but with a blue dress.'

'Now look at the signature,' I said.

Bruno stood, head inclined modestly, as she peered at the signature. Then she turned, her eyes wide and startled. Her quick glance at me was for assistance.

'But it's a forgery,' she said faintly. 'Bruno Fillingley, 1962.'

'Not a forgery,' said Bruno gently, and you could just detect the pain in his voice, held firmly in place by his pride. 'Not even a fake. It's a painting in the style of Reynolds. A fitting decoration for the hall, I thought.'

Amelia looked to me to help her. She painted in the style of Amelia. It hurt her that any artist (and an RA at that) should adopt someone else's style. Bruno registered every nuance in her expression. He spread his hands, his shrug elegant.

'It's much more difficult than working in your own style. Believe me. And quite innocent.'

All right . . . innocent, if Bruno said so. But you could search the whole building and find no more than a dozen in his own style. Oh, I admit you'd find a number in galleries around the country, one in the Tate and two in the National Gallery, but . . .

'Wait till you see the balcony,' I told her.

'There are more?' she asked weakly.

'There are many more,' I agreed.

At that moment we heard tyres on the gravel outside and

Bruno murmured that he had to go out and do his welcoming act again, not using those exact words. 'You're in number three, Richard,' he said. 'Forgive me if I don't come up with you. Ring for tea, if you'd like it.'

We were in the room to the right of the head of the stairs, which opened on to the balcony. At that time, there being no outside windows at balcony level, the paintings there were no more than a line of blocked shadows so that Amelia didn't notice them. I showed her into our room.

It looked down on the stretch of recessed gravel that Bruno reserved for guests. This room, too, was part of the original building. The beams were there, the plaster, the four-poster bed without the posts (or the effect would have been too repressive) and the one door, with a simple latch inside. Amelia looked round.

'No bathroom, Richard?'

'Can't expect too much.' I'd crossed to the window. 'He's converted three rooms off the balcony into bathrooms. We'll just have to slum it for a bit.'

The car being parked below was not the red Fiesta Amelia had mentioned but a battered and ancient Mini. From it, his arms loaded with a bundle of canvases, was climbing a fierce-looking man with tousled red hair and a red beard, who might have been about thirty, in jeans to which he managed to add another tear on the jagged edge of the car door and a roll-top jumper too thick for the weather. Not having one free, he could not shake hands with Bruno, who inclined his head. I didn't hear what Bruno said but the newcomer said briskly: 'Lewis Hately.' Then he stood back to see what effect that might have, seeming relieved when Bruno did no more than place his hand on Hately's arm and lead him inside.

I heard them stump up the stairs, Hately's heavy boots thundering on each tread, and hoped he wasn't going to be stamping round in the night.

'Ask Bruno about the red Fiesta,' said Amelia.

'Does it matter?'

'Just interested.' In the woman who'd been driving it, she meant.

So I was out at the stairhead when Bruno walked back.

'Does everybody park there, Bruno?'

'Yes. I hope it's not going to disturb you. I could find you another room . . .'

'It's not that. There was a red Fiesta apparently on its way here. I mean, where else could it have been going? And it's not.'

'Mysteries, Richard? You're retired now, you know.'

'A small mystery, if you like. We came on her along the lane, with a flat tyre. I helped her change the wheel and she drove off ahead of us. So . . . where's she got to?'

I didn't go into detail about the other points that had aroused Amelia's interest: her anger, which seemed more a personal matter than at the tyre incident; her apparent helplessness when her general attitude was of competence; the fact that no artists' materials had been visible in the car.

I had felt, more than observed, that Bruno had stiffened. 'I must get down . . .'

'Has she arrived?'

'Not here, Richard, I assure you.'

'She was about five-ten, chestnut hair cut short, in a tweed skirt and a brown blouse. Roundish face, brown eyes, firm mouth. Hell, she didn't even smile at me once.'

'Marion,' he said softly, and I couldn't tell whether his voice was completely steady, nor whether he was upset or pleased.

'You know her?'

'Leave this to me, Richard. I know how to handle it.'

Then, very firmly, he pushed past me and down the stairs with a clatter. A moment later I heard the ting of a lifted phone in the entrance hall and the buzz of a dial. But he dialled only two numbers.

I returned to our room in time for the next car. 'She's not arrived here,' I said.

Amelia was at the window. 'Just look at that. Twins.'

The blue Escort now being parked beside the Mini was an exact duplicate of the one Bert Inskip, the potter, had arrived in, which was the other side of my Stag. In fact, looking more carefully, I could see that the two Escorts bore consecutive registration numbers.

'Not to worry,' I said, determined not to become involved with mysteries. 'Bruno mentioned a wife. Veronica, I think he said. They've simply arrived separately.'

Yet it did not seem possible that this slim, handsome woman,



now standing beside her car and looking round with a commanding air of expectation, could be the wife of stumbling Bert. When Bruno appeared in a rush from the porch almost below us (a flustered Bruno, after his phone call) she seemed to expect him to carry her bags. Bruno was surprised at this but nevertheless relieved her of one as she took up the other.

‘How strange,’ said Amelia, frowning at the two Escorts.

‘Come along, I’ll show you round,’ I offered, to take her mind, and mine, from the strangeness.

‘If you’ll just show me the nearest bathroom . . .’

‘Oh . . . sorry. Of course.’

Which got us out on the balcony just as Bruno showed his new acquisition past us.

She was saying: ‘. . . a certain facility in oils and watercolour, but I intend to expand my abilities with pastels. You *have* worked in pastels, Mr . . . er . . . ?’

‘Call me Bruno. Everyone else will.’

‘Ah yes. And I’m Veronica.’

‘I *have* worked in pastels. I studied under Herman Grauss in Vienna, and he worked with Degas in Paris from 1910 to 1917, when Degas died.’

‘The poor man must be ancient now.’

‘He’s dead, Veronica. But even at eighty . . .’

‘But Degas, my dear. *Un peu passé*, don’t you think?’ The lapse into French no doubt being inspired by the mention of Paris.

A door opened and closed, and their voices were cut off. Amelia glanced at me.

‘Didn’t Bruno say they had separate rooms, Bert and Veronica?’

I agreed he had.

‘I wonder whose idea that was,’ she said innocently, her eyes dancing.

I was pleased to see she’d recovered from the shock of Bruno’s Reynolds, so that now I dared to introduce her to the balcony. At the stairhead I found the switches, and the lights sprang on.

They were those daylight strip lights, one above each painting, with little hoods so that they didn’t dazzle. All round the balcony they shone out on their separate treasures, Manet and