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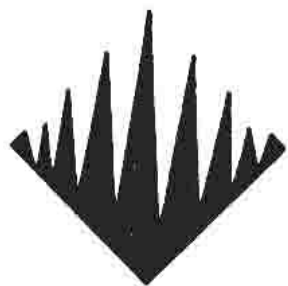
ROBERT  
BARNARD



A HOVERING  
OF VULTURES

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

*A Hovering of*  
**VULTURES**



*Robert Barnard*

**CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS**  
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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**IN MEMORY OF CHRIS  
COMRADE (UP) IN ARMS**

*A Hovering of*  
**VULTURES**

# 1



## *Setting the Scene*

Mrs Marsden set out the enamel saucepans on the griddle in front of the open fireplace, alongside the blackened kettle. Tomorrow, maybe, she would put carrots and turnips in them, and perhaps lay a couple of pork chops on the griddle itself. The idea of having a real fire in the grate had been ruled out. Too dangerous, with so many people. On the table nearby was a chipped earthenware bowl, with a floury rolling-pin beside it. Everything had to be that bit higgledy-piggledy, even dirty, Mr Suzman had said. To present a sanitised, pretty-pretty farmhouse kitchen would go against all the visitors' idea of Susannah Sneddon and her novels.

Not that it was a kitchen as such, merely one end of the large ground floor of the farmhouse. Standing back to survey her preparations Mrs Marsden could see into the area that the Sneddons had used as their living space, occupying two-thirds of that floor: here there were old easy chairs, a heavy sofa with its stuffing exposed in places, and desks under both



the windows. The desk that Susannah had (perhaps) used was laden with brownish typescript and books, and in the centre was a heavy old typewriter. The desk that Mr Suzman said that Joshua had certainly used had bills and chits, a large account book, and a smaller pile of unused old typing paper. On hooks inside the door hung heavy farming coats, slippers were by the fire, and the oil lamp in the centre of the dining table had a very old box of Bryant and May beside it.

Of course the headquarters of the new Sneddon Fellowship wasn't authentic, wasn't "real"—Mrs Marsden knew that better than anybody. A farmhouse—especially a poor farmhouse—in her childhood days was much dirtier and much smellier than this was allowed to be. In fact the most authentic thing about it was probably the smell that drifted in through the window when it was opened, and this was a mere shadow of the smells that had pervaded farmhouses in her childhood. She walked towards the window that overlooked the farm itself. Now *that* was just as it had been in Susannah's time: the bleak, windswept landscape looking out over the West Yorkshire hills towards Lancashire. The fields and hedges were only now beginning to lose some of their threatening bareness with the late coming of Spring, and on the brow of the hill the bleak little spinney looked bony and ominous, with no sign of new leaves. This was the very view that Susannah had looked out on when writing *The Barren Fields*.

Mrs Marsden busied herself round the living room, and then went upstairs to check on the bedrooms. She valued her job, which had come to her unexpectedly and almost accidentally: she was one of the few people still living in Micklewike who had had a farm upbringing in the area in the 'thirties; thus she could act not only as cleaner and cus-

todian of the farmhouse, but adviser to the Fellowship as well. She was also one of the few people around who still had memories of Susannah and Joshua, though to be sure her memories were hazy, for the Sneddons had hardly been thought anything special in the village at the time. Quite the reverse, in fact. An incompetent farmer and his dreamy slatternly sister. But the fact of her having these memories would no doubt be discreetly bruited about. And Mrs Marsden took pleasure in her mild celebrity and in her new job. It suited her down to the ground. For much of the year it would be occasional and part-time: if a visitor turned up, a notice on the farmhouse door would direct him or her to Mrs Marsden's cottage. During the coming weekend, though, and for a few days after that it would be very much full-time, as it would be for the two months of the schools' summer holidays: many of the Sneddons' new admirers were young people.

And many were old people too, people older than herself who had been readers of Susannah Sneddon's books back at the time when they were first published. She thought this as she ran an unnecessary cloth around the lavatory seat in the unhistorical smallest room, installed by later owners of the farm in the late 'forties. Unhistorical it might be, but a god-send it was, for herself now and for countless visitors in the future. The old had uncertain control of their bladders and bowels. They could not be expected to trot down to the village every time they felt a call of nature.

The sound of a car pulling up at the gate sent Mrs Marsden down the rickety (but discreetly strengthened) stairs. That would be Mr Suzman. Sometimes when he came over from his holiday cottage in Oxenthorpe he liked to leave his car in the little Micklewike car park and potter

through the village: past the poky general stores where Susannah Sneddon had shopped, past the Black Horse, where Branwell Brontë had drunk (as where had he not?) and where even Joshua Sneddon had enjoyed a quiet pint when he was in funds. But today was a busy one, the last before the hordes descended, and he had left his car (as he insisted visitors would *never* be allowed to do, though special arrangements were to be made for the disabled) down by the gate, on the verge of the road to the village.

Mr Gerald Suzman was portly, but he walked the path from the road with a sprightliness that belied his considerable expanse of belly. He had a grey goatee beard and a sharp eye, and if he occasionally rubbed his hands together it was as an expression of pleasure or satisfaction, not a Heep-like tic to ingratiate himself. Mr Suzman had no need to ingratiate himself: he was a figure of some note in the world of letters.

He rubbed his hands now, as he stood in the doorway and surveyed the interior of High Maddox Farm.

"All ready, eh, Mrs Marsden?"

Gerald Suzman got on well with Mrs Marsden, and was sure that in her he had found a treasure. She was quick and knowledgeable, and she not only anticipated his wishes, but contributed intelligently herself.

"I think so, sir, as far as can be. Of course it's all too clean, to my way of thinking, too much of a museum . . ."

Gerald Suzman sighed.

"Still? That was the feeling I was trying to avoid. But I suppose it's inevitable. Short of dirtying it artificially, what could we do? The visitors will tramp in dirt, of course."

"But it won't be farm dirt. Happen there's nothing we can do about that. At least this weekend we won't have a turnstile."

"Turnstile? We shall never have a turnstile!" He chuckled momentarily. "Do you know Salisbury Cathedral has a turnstile? A turnstile where the visitor is supposed to make a *voluntary* contribution. There's no hypocrisy like religious hypocrisy, is there? I don't know a cathedral from which all sense of spiritual things has fled more completely. No, no: a turnstile would totally ruin the atmosphere of High Maddox."

"What shall we have, then?"

"I'll put a discreet table by the door, with a small cash box."

"That's difficult, if I also show them round," said Mrs Marsden. "People will snatch anything these days."

"A chain, perhaps? And during the summer months a student, just to take the money? We'll think of something. By the summer I expect to have made several distinct improvements. I hope that we'll have *all* the first editions, including Joshua's, and I'll have all the original dust-jackets framed on the wall. There'll be some more typescripts too, and other little things . . ."

"I could never understand why Mr Joshua's books are so valuable," said Mrs Marsden, thoughtfully. "When everybody says they're such poor stuff."

"Rarity value," said Gerald Suzman briskly. "Nobody bought them at the time. Ten years ago you might have picked one up in a second-hand bookshop for 5p. Now, with the interest in the Sneddons so high—" He spread out his hands, as if the sky was the limit. "And at High Maddox we don't admit that they're poor."

"Just different, sir. I know."

"By the way, Mr Randolph Sneddon will be arriving today."



"Oh yes, the—grand-nephew, is it?"

"No, something remote in the cousin line."

"Oh yes, of course. There were no brothers and sisters, were there? I've not had the pleasure of meeting the gentleman."

"No doubt you will tomorrow. I think we should make him an Honorary Vice-President of the Fellowship, when it is set up. Or perhaps a Council member. He has no particular knowledge of Susannah and Joshua, or of their works—no reason why he should: they died before he was born. But he is a link."

"Of course, sir. Will he be staying at the Black Horse?"

"No, no. Not really comfortable enough for him. Young Randolph is something rather hectic in the City. He'll be staying at the Duke of Cumberland, in Batley Bridge, and I fear he'll find even that a trifle rough and countrified."

"We don't go in for four-star hotels around here," said Mrs Marsden defensively. "It's not that that folk come for."

"You're quite right. And I'm sure he'll understand that. His father was from Abbotsford, after all, originally—not three miles away. I'm expecting him to help entertain the visitors, and perhaps talk to reporters. We have several members of the press coming . . . It will be a busy two days for you, Mrs Marsden."

"Nothing I like more than a bit of busyness, sir. Now and then, of course. I'll be happy to put my feet up come Monday."

"Perhaps we should go around the house just once more, and go over what you are going to say to the visitors. After all, we have to remember that these people are not just casual trippers. These are fans—and knowledgeable ones. Founder members of the Sneddon Fellowship. We owe it to them to get it right."

So they went through the farmhouse room by room, going over yet again the pieces of furniture that were authentic and the pieces that were merely of the kind seen in farmhouses at that period. Mr Suzman pointed out that some of the manuscript pages on the desk were the original typescripts, and he drew attention through the windows to features of the landscape that were recognisably used in one or other of Susannah's novels. This final rehearsal was a mere going through of a routine already well tried. There was no question Mrs Marsden knew her stuff—had known it for weeks. When the two of them landed up at last in the kitchen area she said:

"And how many are you expecting, sir, over the weekend?"

"Call me Gerald, please, I wish you could. My calculation is seventy or eighty, at the very least. Plus a lot of mere trippers."

"Gracious heaven! Where will they all be accommodated?"

"Many are native Yorkshire people and Lancastrians. They'll go home in the evenings. There's still plenty of slack at Haworth at this time of year—lots will go to bed and breakfast places there. And there's Batley Bridge, Halifax—I know of one family that has ended up staying in Colne. None of these places is far, as you know, and many of the visitors will have cars. Probably there are some with caravans and tents."

"I'm a bit worried about this place. It's going to be very crowded, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so, especially just before and just after the meetings. We may have to restrict access at times. Perhaps have a series of viewings every half hour. Yes—that's the best idea."

"I was just thinking, sir, if I'm showing folks around upstairs, there's no one keeping an eye on things down here. I know some of the papers are just copies, but there are the Susannah Sneddon typescripts, and those first editions you say are so valuable . . ."

"I shall be here, and I shall do my bit of escorting round. If you are upstairs I shall be downstairs. Not that I think you need worry. These are fans, and very respectable people. Still, I hope they'll be a lively, varied bunch: plenty of young people, people from all walks of life. We don't want to be too respectable. There used to be an air of smug, middle-class self-congratulation about the Brontë Society, and I wouldn't want the Sneddon Fellowship to get like that. Though the Brontë people have livened up an awful lot recently."

"I wouldn't know about that, sir."

"No, no, of course not."

"Oh, one more thing, sir."

"Yes?"

Mrs Marsden was showing signs of hesitation. Eventually she just pointed towards the floor by the kitchen grate.

"Do I say anything about *that*, sir?"

He was always telling her to call him Gerald, but she could never quite manage it. He fingered his little beard.

"Ah yes, that is the question, isn't it? On the whole I think *not*. With the more casual trippers you will get in the summer I think yes—it's regrettable, but that's the sort of thing they will be looking for. With most of our visitors this weekend, I feel they would appreciate a more tasteful approach, a more discreet one. So I would say if they ask, then point it out and move straight on. Otherwise don't mention it."

Mrs Marsden nodded her agreement, but the two of them lingered for a moment, still looking down at the brown stain

on the bare floorboard, stale witness to the fact that it was there, close by the kitchen range, that Joshua Sneddon had killed his sister with an axe, before going out into the spinney at the end of the field and shooting himself.



## 2



### *The Actors Assemble*

The InterCity 125 pulled out from Kings Cross on time and began its leisurely journey to Leeds. As usual it was full-ish, though there were a few empty seats left for passengers getting on at its usual stopping places. Some of the travellers were still fussing with baggage and getting down books and reading glasses for the journey; others were wondering when the buffet-bar would open. Gregory Waite heaved his rucksack and his girl-friend's neat little suitcase on to the rack and sat down, grinning at her.

"You're a smart packer, I'll give you that," he said. "That suitcase is as light as air."

"I was just thinking it odd that you should need so much more for a walking holiday than I need for a cultural one," said Gillian Parkin, shaking her lustrous bobbed brown head of hair.

"No mystery about that. I'll be roughing it while you're in the lap of luxury at the Black Horse."