

Barnard's eye and ear find the humor, the hypocrisy and the pathos in every little world he explores." - KIRKUS REVIEWS

ROBERT BARNARD



DEATH OF A
SALESPERSON

AND OTHER UNTIMELY EXITS

Death
of a
Salesperson

and Other Untimely Exits

ROBERT BARNARD

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

New York

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Barnard

First American Edition, 1989

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The Cherry Blossom Corpse

Bodies

Political Suicide

Fête Fatale

Out of the Blackout

Corpse in a Gilded Cage

School for Murder

The Case of the Missing Brontë

A Little Local Murder

Death and the Princess

Death by Sheer Torture

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Death of a Perfect Mother

Death of a Literary Widow

Death of a Mystery Writer

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Death
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THE WOMAN IN THE WARDROBE

It was after the funeral, when the relatives and friends had gone and the house felt cold and empty, that Geoffrey Harcourt felt his loss most keenly. The beginning of my aloneness, he thought. It was Monday, too, the start of the school's half-term holiday. Of course he could go along to the office: there was always work for a headmaster to do. But that would only be exchanging one emptiness for another. There were friends he could visit, but he knew that their avoidance of him was partly from the kindest of motives, partly to spare themselves awkwardness. Geoffrey was a reticent man, not one to hawk around his sense of loss.

The vicar had told him how it would be, and he had been right. In fact, the vicar phoned him that evening, knowing how low he would feel after the funeral. Geoffrey had been listening to Mahler. He had always said that Mahler was getting to be that bit overrated, but in his current state the Ninth said things to him that it had never said before. The things they said were not comfortable things, though. He got more comfort from his chat with the vicar.

'Try to keep busy,' the vicar said in his normal voice, which was a comfort after all the hushed tones. 'There must be lots of books around the house that were Helen's rather than yours. The library would probably be grateful for them. Good second-hand clothes are always in demand, particularly in hard times like the present. We at the church could get rid of them for you. I don't mean that you should wipe the house clean of all reminders of her—heaven forbid! But you'll be glad in a month or two's time that you don't have those things still to do . . . You're not brooding on this man, are you? The driver?'

'No,' said Geoffrey truthfully. 'There doesn't seem much point. I'd like to see him caught and banned from driving for life, but beyond that . . . We don't even know it was a man, by the way . . . We don't even *know* it was a Honda. That was just the witness's impression—a silver-blue Honda . . . No, I'm truly not brooding over him. It's just the emptiness.'

'I know, old chap. As I say, just try to keep busy. I'll come round in a few days and see if you've got anything for us.'

So for the rest of the evening Geoffrey combed through the various bookcases that dotted the house. He found twenty or thirty books—novels, travel books, books connected with the sociology course that Helen had been doing at the City Polytechnic. He made them up into a rough parcel, and told himself he would ring the library next day. Certainly the activity had kept his mind occupied.

In the morning, after breakfast—the time of day when he and Helen had been most entirely together—he decided to tackle the clothes. Really he could not see that he need keep anything at all. He shrank from asking any of his or Helen's relatives if they would like anything, and he was quite certain they would in any case refuse. Helen's interest in clothes was strictly utilitarian: she bought what would wear well, what was suitable for a headmaster's wife. There was no sentimental feeling involved. His mind was crowded with memories of Helen, but what she had worn on those occasions he would have been quite at a loss to say.

He put two old suitcases on the bed and opened the half of the wardrobe that contained the drawers. He piled underclothes and nightgowns, tights and hats into one case—and though he did it quickly and expertly he was surprised to find when he had finished that he was nearly crying. Should he make himself a cup of coffee? No. He would finish first. Ten minutes would do it easily.

He threw open the other door. His first emotion was

merely a dim kind of puzzlement: something was not quite right. It was only after a few seconds that the full impact hit him. Here were all the clothes that he—absent-mindedly—knew so well: dresses, suits she had worn to school functions, the three-quarter length gown she wore to their very occasional dinner-dance. But here too . . . He went forward and fingered them wonderingly.

In the darkest, innermost part of the wardrobe were clothes he had never seen. Clothes he could never imagine Helen wearing. They were bright, sensuous clothes, in rich materials—silks, cashmeres. He kept feeling them, as if that would make them real. He could not take his bewildered eyes off them. These were the clothes of a woman of the world: smart, fashionable clothes. He had seen women dressed like this in Bond Street; he could imagine the woman who owned them in the stalls at Covent Garden, dancing at the Dorchester. That evening dress—it shimmered; it was positively glamorous.

He shut the wardrobe door sharply, and leaned his head against it for a moment. Then he went downstairs to make that cup of coffee. He sat down at the kitchen table to drink it, and tried to collect his thoughts.

He rejected almost as soon as it entered his head the idea that she was storing the clothes for a friend. What friend had she that would wear clothes like *that*? Why would she be asked to store only the expensive, fashionable clothes? No, they were Helen's. She had known that, short of her being very ill, he would never think of looking in her wardrobe. What did she want them for? Did she wear them during the day while he was at school? Did she float around the house in a dream of aristocratic elegance, imagining herself at cocktails in Mayfair, dancing the night away at some aristocratic sprig's twenty-first? It seemed so unlike Helen. His wife had been a competent, down-to-earth, no-nonsense woman. So he had always believed.

He steeled himself to go back to the bedroom. He took

the clothes from the wardrobe, ran his hand over their softness, felt their textures, admired their cut. He was no expert, had always had to remind himself to comment on his wife's appearance if they were going out, but these clothes seemed to him immensely stylish: they were the sort of clothes worn by women who were rich, confident and attractive. Helen had inherited a house in suburban London when her mother died, and had sold it at the current inflated prices. The problem was not where she had got the money from. It was why she had felt the desire.

That afternoon he rang the City Polytechnic. He got on to the Admissions Secretary at once.

'Hello. My name is Geoffrey Harcourt. I'm ringing about my wife, Helen Harcourt.'

'Oh yes, I remember her well,' said a friendly female voice. 'We had many good chats when she was deciding on her course.'

'I think she told me about them. I'm afraid she's dead.'

'Oh dear. I *am* sorry. Had she been ill for some time?'

'It was a road accident. A hit-and-run driver.'

'How *awful*. It must have been a terrible shock for you.'

'It was. I just thought I'd ring to inform you, so you can take her off your books.'

There was a pause of fully three seconds before the woman said: 'Yes, of course, we'll do that. And once again, I *am* sorry.'

Geoffrey knew what that pause meant, knew what the woman had been about to say, and had stopped herself from saying: Helen had not been on their books for some time.

His night was awful. He lay on the double bed they had shared, feet away from the wardrobe. Nightmarishly it seemed to him that in the wardrobe he had discovered another woman, a woman who was his wife and was not his wife. Helen had had another life unknown to him, in which she was glamorous, fashionable, even seductive. It was as if some sudden crisis or involuntary action had revealed to

him a side to his own nature of which he had always been unconscious. Helen was not *like* that, he kept saying to himself, had no desire for that kind of life. She was, she had, said the wardrobe.

By next morning he knew he could not leave things there: he had to *know*. He had a grey, old-fashioned Puritan conscience. What his discovery was whispering to him was that somehow he had failed Helen. Still more that meant he had to *know*.

Over breakfast, feeling furtive and grubby, he went through Helen's cheque-book and the monthly statements of her credit card company. So far as he could see there were no hotel bills. When Helen had started staying overnight on Thursdays ('There are so many evening activities that I'm missing out on, and British Rail has practically cut out all the trains after nine') she had told him she had found a little bed-and-breakfast place in Bloomsbury that was clean and cheap. There were no cheque-stubs to bear this out. Nor were there cheques made out to more glamorous hotels. There were, though, largish sums on the statement: they were paid to Harrods, Selfridges, and a shop called Amanda's, which was in Knightsbridge. The clothes, obviously.

His mind honed in on the sociology course. They had discussed it quite a bit at first, hardly at all recently. The subjects had become too esoteric, and besides Geoffrey had the natural contempt of the academic mind for such a subject. It had been a one-day-a-week course, aimed at part-time students and people with special needs. When she had started she had gone on Wednesdays. Some way into the first year she had said that the day had been changed to Thursdays. But wouldn't that have been immensely disruptive of the students' arrangements, and wouldn't the timetable readjustments have been difficult or impossible? She had changed to Thursdays because . . . But no. Best to put any such thoughts aside. Stick to facts. Keep a firm grip

on reality. He had to look at the newspaper to establish that the day was in fact Wednesday.

He took the car up to London. He couldn't face the sympathy and inquiries of the people at the station. At Carbury, the small Essex town where he lived, everyone knew everyone. He drove to the City Polytechnic, then round and round it for twenty minutes until he saw a car pulling out. He nosed into the parking space, and walked into the Poly. In the foyer he prowled around until he found the notice-board with the timetables. With his practised headmaster's eye he skimmed over the mass of detailed information (so many courses, so little knowledge) till he came to 'Sociology (Special Needs)'. If Helen had continued she would now be taking—had said she *was* taking—the third-year course.

He was right. The course was on Wednesdays. The group was currently engaged in a seminar on The Battered Child Syndrome in room 347B. They would be out at twelve o'clock. He took the lift up to the third floor, and walked through the tedious, anonymous corridors. More like a business firm or a rather run-down hotel than a place of education, he thought. How had Helen fitted in here? Had she ever felt at home? He stationed himself near 347B, feeling like a novice plain-clothes policeman.

When the seminar broke up the students trailed out looking bored. It was difficult to imagine how a terrible, touching subject like battered children could be made boring, but the lecturer seemed to have managed it somehow. About a third of the students were the normal college-age young, others were in their twenties or thirties, the rest Helen's age or older. He picked out a sympathetic woman of about forty and went hesitantly up to her.

'Excuse me, I wonder if you can help me. I'm looking for someone who knew Helen Harcourt when she was a student here.'

The woman turned and smiled.