

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Seventy-Seven Clocks

Christopher Fowler

About the Book

The newspapers referred to it as the case of the seventy-seven clocks. There was quite a fuss at the time. We got into terrible trouble. Dear fellow, it was one of our most truly peculiar cases ...

It was late in 1973. As strikes and blackouts ravaged the country during the Heath government's 'Winter of Discontent', members of a wealthy, aristocratic family were being disposed of in various grotesque ways - by reptile, by bomb, by barber. As the hours of daylight diminish towards Christmas, Arthur Bryant and John May of the Met's Peculiar Crimes Unit know that time is the key - and time is running out for the family and the police. The ill-matched duo's investigations lead them into a hidden world of class conflict, craftsmanship and the murky, clandestine loyalties of big business. But what have seventy-seven ticking clocks to do with it?

With Arthur Bryant at his rudest, John May at his most exasperated and a gallery of colourful, not to say bizarre, characters who could only make their home in a city like London, only now can the truth can be revealed.

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About the Author
Also by Christopher Fowler
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SEVENTY-SEVEN
CLOCKS

Christopher Fowler

To Jim.
Fortune aids the brave.

FOREWORD

When *Seventy-Seven Clocks* appeared in hardback a year ago, it caused a bit of a rumpus. In the planning of the Bryant & May books, I envisaged a set of six novels that would form a chronological history of my detective duo's greatest cases, using all the devices of classic murder mysteries, including disguised identities, locked room puzzles, surprise endings and nick-of-time rescues. I had tested the characters in three earlier adventures, and was ready to provide a definitive history of the Peculiar Crimes Unit. One of the early books in which the detectives appeared was called *Darkest Day*, but it did not find its audience, mainly, I felt, because I had been asked to add supernatural elements to the story - and as any mystery reader knows, resorting to the impossible is not playing fair.

However, there were good things in the book that I felt could be presented afresh, and I decided to rewrite it as a case from Bryant & May's past. I made over a thousand changes to the original manuscript, adding pointers to past and future events in the detectives' lives, matching it to the other books in the new series, removing the supernatural angle and resetting the plot during the era of Prime Minister Edward Heath's disastrous 'Three-Day Week' government.

When it was published with an explanatory Afterword, a handful of fans were incensed, despite the fact that I announced my intentions many times in interviews. We happily buy new versions of movies, but I had a valid

reason for rewriting *Seventy-Seven Clocks*, for without it there would only be five integrated Bryant & May novels in the series, not six. Judging by mail I've received from readers who have read both, my cunning plan worked, and the new version is much preferred. Even if you've read the old one you should still find plenty here to enjoy, as well as a few clues as to what happens next.

About the story itself, older readers may recall the nightly rotation of power blackouts Britain endured in 1973, as the spectre of a nation stranded without electricity became a reality. This image suits the plot, for its solution is not as strange as one might imagine, considering that Victorian society was still within living memory in the seventies.

I'd like to thank those who helped to pilot this flight of fancy back from darkness into light; my enthusiastic editor, Simon Taylor, and my fearless British agent Mandy Little. I'd especially like to thank Jim (the Bryant to my May), Sally, Maggie and Martin.

For more information about the Bryant & May series, visit www.christopherfowler.co.uk

Christopher Fowler
London, January 2006

PROLOGUE

‘Talk me through *peculiar*.’

‘What on earth do you mean?’ asked Arthur Bryant.

‘I mean,’ said the young biographer, ‘why does this special police unit of yours only get the peculiar cases?’

‘There, you can speak properly when you try. I don’t hold with slang,’ said Bryant, fiddling with his trouser turn-up and extracting the stem of his pipe. ‘Ah, I’ve been looking for that all morning. When we were founded as an experimental unit, “peculiar” meant “particular”, as in “specialized”. But we started to attract certain types of case, ones which were potentially embarrassing for the government, ones nobody else could get to grips with. Before we knew it, we were dealing with goat-bothering bishops and transvestite Conservatives, not that the latter constitutes much of a peculiarity these days. We acquired the cases that proved too obtuse for traditional police methods.’

‘Like the business with the Water Room.’ The biographer had just finished recording Bryant’s thoughts about this case because it had only just concluded, and everyone’s memories were still fresh, even though they displayed Rashomon-style discrepancies. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve ever dealt with anything like that before.’

‘Actually you’re wrong, there was another case involving water and art, although it was very different. And it happened much earlier, in 1973.’ Bryant eyed the young man and wondered if he could get away with lighting his pipe in the small closed room.

'All right, we'll try that.' The biographer had given up attempting to keep his subject's recollections in chronological order. He switched on his recording equipment in hope. 'What do you remember about it?'

'Not a lot,' warned Bryant. 'I wouldn't make a very good elephant.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Memory.' Bryant tapped the side of his bald head with a wrinkled forefinger. 'Or rather, lack of it. Information and experience. I mean, I have them both, but I'm forever losing the former and forgetting the latter.'

'If you could try to think hard,' the biographer pleaded. His patience had been worn down over the last few weeks of interviews. He was beginning to regret embarking on his project: *The Bryant and May Casebook of Peculiar Crime*. No one had written about London's Peculiar Crimes Unit's legendary detective team before, and he could see why.

'1973, let's see.' Bryant raised his watery azure eyes to the ceiling and thought for a moment. 'It was the year we joined the Common Market, although I don't think anyone noticed. The Foreign Secretary, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, had drawn up paperwork for the agreement, and I recall it had to be accepted on the fifteenth-floor landing of the Common Market headquarters in Brussels, because there was no one left in the office. Luckily, the building's concierge remembered to run up a Union Jack. An inauspicious start to the year, I thought.' Bryant's memory veered between two points: hopelessly vague and absurdly detailed.

'I meant could you remember the case, not the year. Do you have any details about the investigation?' asked the biographer.

'We had a terrible heatwave,' said Bryant, providing the question with an entirely different answer. 'President Nixon had started a second term, even though the Watergate investigation was well under way by then. There were still

anti-war protests in Trafalgar Square. Spiro Agnew was done for tax evasion, wasn't he? And Gerald Ford started to fall over a lot. I'm pretty sure Elton John released *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, which had "Funeral For A Friend" and Princess Diana's memorial song "Candle In The Wind" on it, isn't that strange?' Bryant pursed his lips, thinking. 'Picasso died at ninety-one, a ripe old age. We were involved in the so-called Cod War with Iceland, over fishing rights. It was a dreadful year for haircuts. My partner John had gone in for sideburns; not a good look, but he was having a mid-life crisis. At least, that's what we call them now. Back then, it was known as a breakdown. What else happened? I think the Bahamas got their independence, because I remember laughing when a canopy dropped on Prince Charles' head during the handover ceremony. The ceiling of the Shaftesbury Theatre fell in as well, and *Hair* had to close. Such a shame, I loved that show. "Let The Sunshine In", what a nice sentiment. There was the IRA bombing campaign, of course, and half the country was shut down by industrial action. Strikes everywhere. The unions had more power in those days. We had blackouts, and everyone stockpiled candles. There was a fuel crisis. We all had to queue for petrol. Arab terrorists attacked an American jet at Rome airport, didn't they? And I bought some new shoes from Mr Byrite, but the soles came off.'

'Yes,' said the biographer, exasperated, 'but can you remember anything at all about the crime?'

'Well, of course. I kept it all here in my notebook.'

'You mean you had it written down all the time?' The biographer was aghast.

'Yes, but I transcribed it in a hieroglyphic code.' Bryant riffled through the pages, puzzled. 'I wrote everything in code back in those days. I don't know why I bothered; my handwriting's illegible. I numbered all the translation keys, and kept them together for safekeeping in my landlady's cow.'

'I'm sorry?'

'She kept a china cow in her kitchen cabinet. An Edwardian milk jug. Hardly an heirloom, but it served its purpose.'

'So you can decipher the notes?'

'No, she threw it away when the Queen Mother died, I have no idea why - wait, I do remember something. The newspapers referred to it as the case of the seventy-seven clocks. There was quite a fuss at the time. We got into terrible trouble. But you probably know all about that.'

'No, I don't,' the biographer admitted.

'You don't? Dear fellow, it was one of our most *truly* peculiar cases. Hardly seems possible, looking back. You have to remember that we had no computers in those days, no mobile phones. Most equipment was still mechanical. Typewriters and carbons and telexes - it slowed you down. The whole awful business could have been so easily avoided. Instead there were frightful deaths, and I had to deal with that appalling family. I remember as if it was yesterday.' This was patently untrue, for Bryant remembered very little at all about yesterday.

'Why don't you tell me all about it?' the biographer suggested, with an air of apprehension.

'Is it possible to succeed without any act of betrayal?'

Jean Renoir

'Judgement drunk, and brib'd to lose his way,
Winks hard, and talks of darkness at noon-day.'

William Cowper

1

LIGHTS OUT

SHE RECOGNIZED THE symptoms at once.

The stipple of sweat in the small of her back. Ice-heat prickling her forehead. Skittering panic in the pit of her stomach. As she walked faster, she thought, *This is absurd, it can't harm me*. But beneath her mind's voice ran another, dark and urgent. *It's not the night, but what waits in it*.

The sun had barely set, but the road ahead was indistinct in the fading light. She refused to consider what might be out there. *The Prince of Darkness is a gentleman*, hissed the voice, a phrase recalled from her schooldays. She had no intention of meeting the prince this evening, and quickened her pace, not daring to look back. The clouds of night opened like ink blossoming in water, threatening to overtake her. Blackbirds raggedly skirted the trees, taking measure of the rising wind.

For as long as she could remember, Sam Gates had been terrified of the dark. The cause of this nyctophobia was beyond the reach of recollection: perhaps some early trauma at the top of the stairs. Her mother accused her of having an overactive imagination; she made it sound like a harmful thing. Others would have seen misted fields on either side of the road, bare elm trees blurring in the dusk. Sam saw demons swarming.

She tried to read her watch, but it was too dark to see the face. *Damn Nicholas and his country weekend*, she

thought. If he'd shown some warning sign of his intentions, she would never have come in the first place. The man should have been wearing a red toggle, *Pull To Inflate Ego*, like a lifejacket. His personality had changed the moment he'd realized that she wasn't going to bed with him.

Now it was almost dark, and she was stuck in the deserted Kent countryside on a Sunday night, without a car, in the freezing cold, with an irrational dread nipping at her, goading her into a trot. She was a town girl, used to city lights and cars and sirens and people. She wanted to hear Radio Caroline on her transistor. Instead, it was so quiet you could hear a cow break wind five miles away. Where the hell was everybody?

She thought back over the weekend, and the mistake she had made in accepting his invitation. On Saturday morning they had 'motored down to the lodge' - his Leslie Phillips expression, as if they were living in the fifties - in the red MG that kept stalling, its roof folded back to admit the freezing country air.

The 'lodge', a damp Victorian monstrosity situated on the far side of Detling, had been designed in such a way that the watery warmth of the winter sun was excluded from it through every phase of the earth's rotation. The ground floor was surrounded by tall wet nettles, the brickwork obscured by fifty types of reeking brown fungus. The rooms were virtually devoid of furniture. There was no central heating. Nicholas's family might have breeding, but they obviously had no money. The upkeep of such property, he'd explained, was staggering, and his parents preferred to stay in their Knightsbridge flat.

It didn't take her long to realize that Nicholas used the empty house for sex. One look at the bedrooms was all she needed to know. Adult magazines, wine bottles, mirrors and candles, a lad's pathetic idea of what would excite women. The blinds were drawn tight in all the upper rooms, and probably remained so throughout the year.

Her partner's dinner conversation had consisted of college tales laden with sexual innuendo. He was a different man on his home ground, all smirk and swagger, and she hated it. It was as if she had ceased to be his friend, and had become his quarry. The second time he brushed her breast while reaching for the Chianti, Sam had announced that she was going to bed. No amount of persuasion could keep her from the stairs.

She'd spent a sleepless night barricaded into her room, wearily listening to his pleas and insults through the door.

She had never looked forward to dawn so much in her life. Rising at the earliest opportunity, she had listened to the farming forecasts of incoming rain while frying herself bacon. Shortly after ten Nicholas had appeared in his dressing gown. The blackness of his mood barely allowed him to acknowledge her presence. The rest of the morning passed in gelid silence. Denied his conquest, Nicholas had regressed to a sullen schoolboy.

Her uppermost concern had been the problem of getting home. Trouble with the car - beneath which he passed most of the afternoon - prevented Nicholas from running her to the station. Typically, there was no cab service operating in the area. Sam found herself left alone to wander the rooms of the old farmhouse. As she examined the shelves of discoloured paperbacks, she grew more bored and upset. Finally she had collected her overnight bag and struck out across the field in the direction of the main road.

She would have been happy never to see him again, but he would be there the next morning, at work. They even shared the same damned counter. *Well judged*, she thought. *You really know how to pick them.*

She pushed the auburn fringe from her eyes and studied the dim road, hoping to see a light, but there was nothing. No rising moon. The darkness was nearly complete. The thought punched the air from her chest.

She began to run along the narrow lane as the first drops fell. The downpour reduced her vision further, adding to her deepening panic. Bare branches entwined overhead like the spiny legs of insects. The trees and hedgerows were filled with scampering black imps that dropped with the rain and tried to catch her, but she ran on, hugging the curve in the road.

The dark drew forth stalking men. They lay in wait for her, appearing in clumps of wet leaves, unfolding their fingers like scythes. They could not survive in London, where there was always light, but here in the black woods and meadows they could pursue their pleasures without restraint . . .

Then she saw the light of the telephone box.

A red one, familiar as an old friend, with rectangular windows and directories and a buttery lightbulb that glowed through the torrent. Smothering her crawling fears, she concentrated on the sanctuary ahead. She wrenched back the door on its leather straps and threw herself inside.

Relief, afforded by the single bare lightbulb, washed over her, and she sank to her knees, filling the booth with angry sobs, furious at her own weakness. Everything had gone wrong. She had intended to use the weekend as a protest. Instead of attending some horrible charity dinner at Claridges with her parents, instead of keeping an appointment with her therapist, she had taken off for a weekend with a man she barely knew. She might even have had sex with Nicholas if he'd proved to be a halfway-decent human being. She'd wanted to show everyone that she had a mind of her own, but even carrying out this simple task had been beyond her.

As the rain pounded the roof, she drew the knees of her fringed jeans up beneath her chin and cried, crouching low in the fetid booth, protected from surrounding blackness as hostile as the surface of an alien planet.

She remained trapped in the haven of light, not daring to move, until a passing motorist rescued her over two hours later.

SEIZURE

DAILY TELEGRAPH, MONDAY 6 December 1973

MONDAY'S OUTLOOK

The fine sunny spells of the last few days are set to end as we bid farewell to the capital's unseasonably clear skies. Tumbling temperatures and strong northerly winds are on their way, bringing with them moderate to heavy rain. This will affect all parts of the Greater London area by nightfall. No one in London should ever be surprised by the weather, but this year we may expect winter to arrive with a vengeance.

The elderly lawyer dropped his newspaper on to the marble surface of the washroom counter. *Nothing in the business section about the Japanese bid*, he thought. *At least that's something to be thankful for*. Besides, he had something else on his mind. He was still annoyed about his hotel room. But there was no way he could pursue the matter further. He had complained as much as he dared; to say any more would risk drawing attention to himself.

He filled the sink with fiercely heated water and splashed some on his face. What a business; never in all his years of dealing with the family had he heard of such a thing. He stared back at himself from red-rimmed eyes. He

needed a good night's sleep. He could do with being ten years younger, too. He was tired of handling the dirty work for others. His profession had once been a noble one.

He dried his hands on a thick cotton towel. A reflected movement in one of the stalls turned him from the basins. One of the cubicles was occupied. As he watched, the toilet door swung half open. The figure behind it stayed in shadow, silently watching.

The lawyer stepped to one side, trying to see the face. The door swung wide until it banged against the tiled wall.

He tried to raise the alarm, but the wretched cloth-wrapped creature ran forward with surprising swiftness. Raising his hands, he pressed them over the lawyer's face.

After that there was nothing.

Nothing at all.

Then it was a second, a minute, an hour later.

He had no idea how much time had passed, but he was still in the washroom, lying by the basins, feeling dizzy. He checked his ornate gold wristwatch, but had trouble focussing. He had a terrible headache. His neck hurt. The washroom was empty. The cubicles stood with their doors wide, the silence only broken by a dripping tap. He needed to take a short nap. Unable to comprehend what had happened, Maximillian Jacob pulled himself up, picked up his newspaper and wove his way back to the lobby of the Savoy Hotel. He located a deep armchair in a quiet corner, where he could rest without being disturbed.

Sam Gates checked her watch again and frowned. Five to six. Another five minutes until the evening receptionist was due to take over. Through the foyer doors she watched the turning taxi beams fragmenting through needles of rain. The street outside the Savoy was the only one in London where they drove on the other side of the road; everything about the hotel was quirky in some way.

It still hurt to think about last night, but she was determined not to let the pain surface. It had been past midnight when she had finally reached home. She had never seen her parents so angry. Thankfully, Nicholas had ignored her for most of today, except for an acid comment about her tired appearance.

The hotel was unusually quiet for a Monday afternoon, but the lull would not last long. Many of the three hundred rooms above their heads were being readied for Common Market delegates. They were arriving to attend a conference scheduled to start in Downing Street a week from today, on 13 December. Speakers had been invited from throughout the Commonwealth, too. The staff had been briefed on correct modes of address.

For the moment, though, the lobby was a haven of peace. A disoriented Italian family stood with maps folded under their arms like weapons, waiting for the rain to stop before venturing out in new Burberry raincoats. Someone was dozing beneath a newspaper in one of the armchairs near the entrance to the American Bar. Nicholas was dealing with a pair of regular patrons, two querulous Spanish women who had been visiting the hotel together since the war. For many guests the Savoy was a second home rather than a hotel, idiosyncratic and personalized in its handling of their requests, famed for its attention to detail.

Although she had joined the hotel just a few weeks ago, Sam had been made to feel like a member of an exclusive, if rather remote, family. Her mother had been upset when she announced her intention of taking the job. Gwen and Jack had long expected her to apply for a position in the family business. For their only daughter to have chosen her own employment - and as a *menial* - was unthinkable. She scowled at the thought as she gathered up her belongings. Let them think whatever they liked. She was enjoying her new-found anonymity.

'You're in a rush,' observed Nicholas. 'Got yourself a date?' There was no hint of sarcasm in his voice, but she knew better than to trust him now.

'Chance would be a fine thing.' She threw a book into her backpack and zipped it up. 'I have a figure-drawing class.'

'Of course, it's none of my business.' Nicholas checked his blond hair in the mottled lobby mirrors. 'If you're really interested in studying art, why are you working here?'

'You're right,' Sam agreed. 'It's none of your business.' She noticed now that Nicholas had thin hairy wrists, a bony throat and sprouting nostrils. He was a dim snob who used his public-school accent to ward off undesirables like a vampire hunter with a crucifix. How could she not have seen this before? His habit of joking whenever women were mentioned should have tipped her off to some kind of sexual inadequacy. *Thank God I didn't unlock the bedroom door*, she thought. Hopefully, their weekend encounter would never be mentioned again. Men like Nicholas were concerned about saving face.

'Wait a minute.' Nicholas pointed at the revolving door. The porter was carrying through several pieces of ancient, scuffed luggage. 'Someone's checking in. You may as well make it your last job tonight.'

'Thanks.' She dropped her bag on to a chair and returned to the counter. The man walking across the carpet towards her was tall, broad-chested and black. His skin seemed an extension of his bronzed leather jacket. A perfectly trimmed Afro came almost to his shoulders, surrounding his face in a dark halo. Standing amid a jumble of well-travelled bags he looked like a particularly confrontational piece of modern sculpture. *He's overdoing the rock-opera look*, she thought, vaguely irritated.

'Hi, I'm checking in - Joseph Herrick.' The voice was softly seasoned with a Scottish accent. As she confirmed the new guest's reservation and assigned him one of the

larger suites she averted her eyes, performing the prime Savoy hospitality function of never appearing surprised. She was, though.

The elderly Spanish women stared at the young guest's heavy motorcycle boots in distaste, lowering their gaze to the ground and up again as if expecting someone to come and remove him.

Sam felt like coming to Mr Herrick's defence. After accepting his registration form she found herself speaking with rather more volume than necessary. 'Here is your suite key, Sir. If I can do anything to make your stay more comfortable, please don't hesitate to call me.'

'The personal touch, I like that,' he replied with a broad grin. 'Evening, ladies.' He smiled politely at the disapproving couple and clattered across the lobby in time to pull the first of his cases back from the porter.

'I hate to take your job, man, but you'd better let me have those.' He was loud and friendly as he began hefting the bag straps on to his arms. 'There's stuff in here I don't trust to anyone else, no disrespect to you, Sir.'

His cheerful attitude made her smile. The English crept into smart hotels as if entering cathedrals. They queried their bills in whispers, slinking to their rooms like criminals. Handsome young black men didn't stay at the Savoy. England was still running *The Black And White Minstrel Show* on primetime TV. Liberation remained on Hendrix covers and on the stage of *Hair*.

'You'd better check the validity of his reservation,' said Nicholas. 'I mean, this is the Savoy. The other guests don't want to see . . .' he searched for the right phrase '. . . *people like him* . . . hanging around the lobby.'

'I don't see how you can judge someone so easily.'

'He's probably in that awful rock musical,' Nicholas sniffed. 'The way they swagger about in bright clothes just shows a lack of breeding.'

'Funny, I always thought that about the gold-covered white women one sees in Knightsbridge,' she replied. Nicholas had kept his prejudices hidden before the weekend. She decided it was safer to leave quickly. 'I'm running late. I'll see you tomorrow.'

She was returning from the staff room in her Afghan coat when she noticed the sleeping man again. He'd been sprawled in a corner of the lobby with a *Daily Telegraph* over his face for quite a while now. As she passed Nicholas, she pointed at the recumbent figure. 'You'd better wake him up.'

'You're nearer. You do it.'

'I already told you, I'm late.'

Sighing, she crossed to the chair and gently removed the newspaper from their guest. The unveiled face was florid and middle-aged. A flap of grey hair leaned back from the man's head like a raised gull's wing. She recognized the sleeper as a guest who had checked into the hotel on Friday. She tapped him gently on the shoulder. Overhead, the lights in the central chandelier flickered, momentarily dimming the room.

'Mr Jacob, time to wake up . . .'

Jacob's lips rattled out a furious blast of air and he sat sharply upright.

'What the devil—?' His eyes bulged, his throat distending as he lurched forward in his seat, clutching at the arms. For a moment Sam thought she had startled the guest in the middle of a dream. Now she saw that he was choking. Before she could take any action, he jackknifed forward, spluttering and spraying a fine crimson mist through his teeth.

She saw Nicholas reaching for a telephone as she tried to hold the agitated guest down in his seat.

'Nicholas, come and give me a hand, he's having some kind of seizure.'

The body beneath her was bucking in the grip of violent convulsions. Jacob's left foot shot out and cracked her painfully on the shin. Together they fell to the floor, landing hard on their knees just as Nicholas arrived at their side.

'What's wrong with him?' he asked, gingerly attempting to grab an arm.

'How should I know? He could be an epileptic. Did you get through?'

'The house doctor's line is busy.'

Jacob's eyes had rolled up in their sockets so that only the whites showed. A glittering knot of blood hung from his chin. Sam wasn't sure of the procedure in such a situation. With her knees planted on his twisting shoulders, she grabbed his tie and wadded it into his mouth to prevent him from biting his tongue. She felt inside his jacket and pulled out a wallet, flicking it open.

'What are you doing?' yelled Nicholas.

'I'm looking for a card that says he has a medical condition.'

Jacob's limbs suddenly dropped and he became heavy, sliding flat on to the floor, taking Sam down with him. There followed a moment of absolute stillness, as if the man's spirit was wrenching free from his body. With a final bark he emptied the contents of his stomach, flooding the intricately patterned carpet.

'Oh, that's disgusting,' Nicholas grimaced.

Sam looked from the fleshy corpse in her embrace to the benign gold cherubs in the ceiling above. She had felt the man die. As the realization hit her, a wind began to rush in her ears and the room distanced itself, telescoping away as the world fled to darkness.

VANDALISM

LONDON HID ITS secrets well.

Beneath the damp grey veil of a winter's afternoon, the city's interior life unwound as brightly as ever. The rituals interred within the heavy stone buildings remained as immutable as the bricks themselves. The city still bore the stamps of an empire fallen from grace - its trampled grandeur, its obduracy - and, increasingly, its violence.

Having survived another day of rummaging through handbags without discovering a single gun, knife or IRA bomb, the security guards at the entrance to the National Gallery were about to console themselves with a strong cup of tea.

George Stokes checked his silver pocket watch, a memento of thirty years' loyal service, and turned to his colleague. 'Twenty to six,' he said. 'In another ten minutes you can nip up and ring the bell. There won't be anyone else coming in now.'

'Are you sure, George?' asked the other guard. 'I make it nearly a quarter to.'

Outside, bitter December rain had begun to bluster around an almost deserted Trafalgar Square. Flumes from the great fountains splattered over the base of the towering Norwegian Christmas pine that had been erected in the centre of the piazza. The tree stood unlit, its uppermost branches twisting in the wind.

The roiling, bruised sky distended over the gallery, absorbing all reflected light. The gallery was emptying out, its patrons glancing up through the doors with their umbrellas unfurled, preparing to brave the night.

As the two guards compared timepieces, the entrance door was pushed inwards and a figure appeared, carrying in a billow of rain.

'Pelting down out there,' said Mr Stokes, addressing the dripping figure. 'I'm afraid we're closing in a few minutes, Sir.'

'Time enough for what I have in mind.'

The guard shrugged. Office workers sometimes stopped by on their way home to seek solace in a single favourite painting. He took a good look at the man standing before him, and his brow furrowed in suspicion. 'Do you mind if I check inside your bag?' he asked. The bombing campaign had made everyone warier of late.

There is a mosaic set in the floor of the National Gallery which highlights many emotional concepts: COMPASSION, WONDER, CURIOSITY, COMPROMISE, DEFIANCE, HUMOUR, LUCIDITY and FOLLY are engraved among them. Bill Wentworth was beginning to wonder if these qualities only existed in the flooring. He tugged down the peak of his cap, stepping back to allow a party of Japanese schoolchildren to pass. The excitement of the job lay in the paintings themselves, not in the enquiries of the general public. His fingertips brushed the maroon linen wall of the gallery as he walked. He had entered Room 3 (Germany and the Netherlands). Dark rain drifted against the angled skylights in the corridor beyond.

It was Wentworth's first day as a gallery warden, and he had been looking forward to answering visitors' questions. He'd seen the job as a chance to finally use his art-history training.

'You can forget that,' his superior, Mr Stokes, had warned during their morning tea break together. 'Times have changed. Few people ask about the Raphael or the Titian or the Rembrandt any more. They just want pointing to the toilet or the French Impressionists. They're not interested in the older stuff because it takes more understanding.'

Stokes was a fan of the old Italian schools. He preferred a Tiepolo to a Turner any day of the week, and was happy to tell you so.

The new warden walked slowly about the room, waiting for the last few members of the public to depart. The only sound was the squeak of his shoes on polished wood and the drumming of the torrent on the glass above. He paused before an arrangement of Vermeers, marvelling at the way in which the painter had captured these small, still moments in the lives of ordinary people, peaceful figures in light and shadow, opening letters, sweeping their houses, cool and calm and timeless.

'The public are no problem,' Stokes had informed him. 'Soon you won't even notice them. But the paintings take on a life of their own.' He had gestured at the walls surrounding them. 'You start noticing things you never saw before. Little details in the pictures, always something new to catch the eye. A speck of red you never saw before in Monet's water lilies, another figure in the background of a crucifixion. They'll bother and intrigue you, and the subjects will make you care for them. Just as well, because there's bugger-all else to do around here.'

'Surely it can't be that dull,' Wentworth had asked, growing despondent.

Stokes had thoughtfully sucked his moustache. 'I know how to say "Don't touch it, Sonny" in seventeen languages. Do you find that exciting?'

Wentworth was still considering their conversation when Stokes himself came puffing in from the main entrance to

the gallery, flushed and flustered.

'Mr Wentworth, have you seen him?'

'Who's that, Mr Stokes?'

'The old geezer!'

'Nobody's been through here, as you can see.' Wentworth gestured about him. There was only one exit to the exhibition room, and that led back to the main stairwell.

'But he must have passed this way!'

'What did he look like?'

Stokes paused to regain his breath. He waved his fingers over his shoulders. 'Tall, overweight, with mutton-chop whiskers. Heavy tweed cape and a funny hat - sort of stovepipe, like an Edwardian gentleman. Carrying a carpet bag.'

For a moment Wentworth wondered if his boss was suffering a side effect of spending so much time surrounded by the past. 'What's he supposed to have done?' he asked.

'I tried to search his bag and he shoved past me,' explained Stokes. 'He ran up the steps and disappeared before I could make after him. My shrapnel wound.'

'I'll help you look.'

The guards marched from the room and headed for the circular stone stairs that led to the lower-floor galleries. They had just reached Room 14 (French Painting Before 1800) when a breathless young attendant slid to a stop beside them.

'We've just seen him on the far side of the Sunley Room,' he shouted.

'Going in which direction?'

'Away from us.'

'Then he's heading for the British Rooms,' replied Stokes. 'We can cut him off by going through 44 and 45.'

Aware of the fragile safety of their treasure house, the three wardens galloped through the empty halls in pursuit.