

CALLAN - SHORT STORIES

JAMES MITCHELL

FEATURING CALLAN



CALLAN

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File on a Deadly Deadshot - March 11th 1973

"Like it?" Hunter asked.

Callan weighed the shotgun in his hands, then swung it to his shoulder. Feel and balance were so perfect that the weapon handled like an extension of his own body. He lowered it then, and looked at the polished wood of the stock, the dul gleaming barrels.

"It's beautiful," he said.

"I think we can allow the word," Hunter said. "It's a Purdey. One of a matched pair. They were made for my father. Ever fire one?"

"I've fired shotguns. But not one of these."

"They're the same as any other," Hunter said, "except that they're a bit more accurate than most. Let's see what you can do."

They walked down the track that led to the clay-pigeon stand, and Callan looked around for the servant who would operate it. There was none.

"This shooting club is for gentlemen," said Hunter, "and gentlemen very often miss. You don't. I should hate it to be known that I brought a professional here." He climbed into the seat. "When you're ready." Callan loaded both barrels, and looked up, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the clear, cold autumn light, breathing slowly and evenly, letting his whole body adjust to the rhythm he would need if his shooting were to live up to Hunter's expectations. "Pull" he said. The clay-pigeon came up low and fast, travelling across the sun. Callan fired, and the gun did precisely what he expected: the clay-pigeon disintegrated. "Pull."

Another one, climbing this time, moving against the darkness of distant trees but again the gun obeyed him to the letter, and the disc was shattered. And so it went on; over and over. The speeding, difficult target never quite fast enough to escape the gun's perfection. When at last Hunter called a halt. Callan looked at the shotgun with something like awe.

"It's incredible," he said.

"You both are," said Hunter. "Even my father—" He broke off. His father was dead, and he himself had no sons. That was a bitterness he could not share with Callan.

Callan said: "You want me to use this thing for a job?"

It was hard to believe that Hunter would permit any fragment of his personal life to intrude into his profession.

"I do," said Hunter. "I know you find the fact surprising, but once I've explained the thing to you I think you'll understand why. We'll talk over lunch at my club."

Callan reacted to that one; couldn't help it. Hunter never took operatives to lunch at his club.

"I have to be sure that your manners are as good as your shooting," Hunter said.

Game soup, steak and kidney pie, a peach, then cheese, and to drink, claret that Hunter had insisted Callan choose.

“Not quite as good as your shooting,” Hunter said, “but then nothing could be. All the same—I think you’ll pass.”

“Pass where?” said Callan. “All you’ve told me so far is that I’ll be living with the nobs for a bit.”

“Whitmore Hall,” said Hunter. “That’s Lord Marsden’s estate in Northumberland. You’re going there to shoot.”

“Who?” said Callan.

Hunter grimaced. Callan’s forthrightness was as displeasing as his sense of humour. When he combined the two he was insupportable.

“Lord Marsden is something of a marksman,” he said. “He is also somewhat impecunious. He has formed the habit of inviting other marksmen to shoot there at this time of year on a competitive basis—”

“Winner take all?”

“Almost all,” said Hunter. “Marsden charges an entrance fee to cover hospitality,”

“How much?”

“Five hundred pounds.”

Callan whistled. “He must be very hospitable,” he said.

“He is,” said Hunter. “That’s why he so often wins.” He sipped at his claret. “Not a bad wine, incidentally. You chose quite well.”

Callan waited, as Hunter sipped again. “Baumer will be there,” Hunter said. “He’s quite a fair shot I believe.”

“Baumer?”

“Textiles, clothing, banking, construction,” said Hunter. “Forty or fifty million pounds’ worth. Jewish — and very pro-Israel. Six months ago he built Israel a series of rocket-launching pads — and refused payment. An Arab terrorist society has sentenced him to death.”

“You’re sending me to Northumberland to shoot an Arab with a Purde shotgun?”

“No,” said Hunter. “The Arabs have put Baumer out to contract — according to Israeli Intelligence, which is usually very reliable.”

“Shin Beth knows what, it’s doing all right,” said Callan.

“I agree,” said Hunter.

“So why don’t you let them handle it?”

“Nobody handles anything here except me,” said Hunter. “Besides — if you save Baumer’s life, Shin’Beth will owe me a favour.”

“So will Baumer.”

To Hunter, jokes were meaningless: he ignored them.

“He is to die at Whitmore Hall,” said Hunter. “A shooting accident.”

“Who’s going to commit the accident?”

“I don’t know,” said Hunter. “That’s why I’m sending you.”

“Look, Hunter,” said Callan, “nobody can stop an assassin. You know that.”

“This man is a professional,” Hunter said. “He has to be—if it’s a contract. That

gives you rather more scope.”

“It also means he’ll be a better shot.”

“All Marsden’s guests are excellent shots,” said Hunter. “I told you. Many of them are well-born or well-connected—or both. Be discreet.”

Callan said : “I can’t make any promises—. . . You really don’t know who’s got the contract?”

“I don’t know,” said Hunter. “I don’t even suspect. But now and again I have nightmares.”

“About who?”

“My dreams are my own,” Hunter said. “Besides I want you. to go there with an open mind. I could be wrong, you know. David, The possibility is remote, but it is a possibility.”

“When do I go?” Callan asked.

“On Friday,” Hunter said. “Take a valet with you.”

“A valet?”

“It’s expected,” Hunter said. “You don’t wish to appear eccentric.”

“No, indeed,” said Callan, and smiled. “Is Meres available?”

“Toby has a job at the moment. But several of the others are free,”

“I’ll see,” said Callan.

“In every other respect you have a free hand,” said Hunter. “Your cover story” in the file at headquarters.”

“How’s the file labelled?” Callan asked. “I mean if you don’t know who the fellow is.”

“It’s labelled Deadshot,” said Hunter, “appropriately enough.”

He lifted the wine-bottle, discovered that it was empty, and sighed.

“I shan’t object to an accident,” he said, “provided that it happens to the right person.”

* * *

“Me?” said Lonely, “A valley? “

“You could do it on your head,” said Callan.

“It’s the only way I bloody could do it,” said Lonely, and gulped at his beer. “Mr Callan I can’t even talk proper.”

“You don’t have to,” said Callan. “You used to be my batman. You saved my life during the war.”

“What war, Mr. Callan?”

“Any bloody war,” said Callan. “Look—do you want a hundred nicker or don’t you?”

“But—but what would I have to do? “

“Press my pants,” said Callan.

“I could do that,” said Lonely. “I always get laundry duty when I do bird.”

“There you are then,”

“But—what I mean—what d’you want a valley for? ‘

“To make me look posh, said Callan, “So mind you polish my shoes properly.”

They drove north in a Bentley that Hunter had provided: a new and ostentatious Bentley that proclaimed the newness of its owner's fortune, as did the brand new and too geary clothes in the over-elaborate suitcase. For Callan was not a gentleman. He was a nouveau-riche adventurer who'd made a slightly dodgy fortune in Malaya, got out just in time and devoted his retirement to shooting. Of all the things he took with him only the Purdeys held any sense of tradition — and according to his story he'd won them in a poker game in Kuala Lumpur. Callan moved into the outside lane of the motorway and risked a glance at Lonely, laboriously thumbing his way through a book of household hints.

"I never knew that," said Lonely. "Talcum Powder for grease-stains. Handy that is."

"Think you can handle it?"

"Do me best," said Lonely. His voice was uncertain.

"And the other little job?"

"Piece of cake," said Lonely. This time his voice held no doubts at all.

They left the motorway, fretted and fumed through Newcastle, to a wild and desolate sea-coast, before Callan turned the great car west towards empty moorland, mile, after mile of it, and Lonely looked out of the car window and shuddered.

"Blimey," he said. "Ain't they never heard of people up here?"

But then the car reached the brow of a hill, and looking, down they could see a great house of grey stone set in a formal garden flanked with woodland.

"You never told me we was going to stay in a palace," Lonely said.

"Stick with me kid," said Callan. "Nothing but the best for my mates."

"That's as maybe," said Lonely, "but I'm the one what eats in the servant hall."

Lord Marsden had five guests for that shoot: Baumer, Endicott, Lorimer, Minns and Callan. Endicott was in plastics, Lorimer was a landowner, and Minns owned garages. They all dressed more quietly than Callan, who had added a ruffled shirt and maroon bow tie to his corded velvet dinner-jacket.

Even Lonely thought he was over-dressed. . . . But the talk that night was of guns and shooting, and when they discovered that, Callan knew about these things, and ate with the right knives and forks, they accepted him readily enough. After dinner, when they settled to poker, and Callan lost, they accepted him more readily than ever.

As he played each hand Callan looked at the men around him. Baumer, at 50 was the oldest; the rest he would guess were all under 40, and different as character and cheese—Endicott was plump, Lorimer tall, Minns stocky—except for one thing

Each man had an economy, of movement and quickness of reflex that put them

in the marksman class, but only one of them, according to Hunter's information, was willing to use those gifts against another human being.

And it was next door to impossible to guess who that one was. Endicott, who dragged and worried at his cigar whether he won or lost—or Lorimer, who won steadily and yet never relaxed, or Minns who invariably took one look at his cards and then left them face down throughout the rest of the hand? Or Marsden maybe, so solicitous about offering the brandy to his guests, and so forgetful about taking any himself?

They played till midnight, and Callan wrote out cheques to Lorimer and Marsden, and hoped to God that Hunter would allow them on expenses.

"Not too early a start tomorrow, gentlemen," Marsden said. "Breakfast at eight—and after that we'll meet in the gun-room."

"What do we start on?" Callan asked.

"Clay-pigeons," Marsden said. "I hope that's agreeable to you?"

"That's fine." Callan said. For clay-pigeons they'd be together in a group, so that gave Baumer at least one more day to live.

He went up the staircase to his room to find Lonely yawning over a shooting jacket he was supposed to be brushing.

"Any luck?" Callan asked.

"You're joking," said Lonely. "The other valleys was in and out of their bosses' rooms half the night."

"How about you?"

"I dubbed your boots," said Lonely, "and I pressed your trousers." He brooded for a moment. "Demeaning, that's what it is," he said at last. "Stuck-up gits."

"Who?"

"Them other valleys," Lonely said. "I knew they'd be la-di-da. Still—look on the bright side. They can't, none of them, play brag."

He brought Callan's tea to him next morning, and listened while Callan told him what to do.

"I heard about the clay-pigeons," he said at last. "The valleys all has bets on."

"That'll be your chance to take a look around." said Callan.

"Do me best, Mr. Callan."

"Don't let anybody catch you at it."

"What, them gits?" Lonely's scorn was withering. "They couldn't catch cold they slept in a deep-freeze, that lot."

Callan went down to a breakfast of Edwardian amplitude, then carried his gun case to where the others were waiting. Every one of them had guns as sleek and elegant as his own, and watched as Callan opened the case and assembled his.

"Purdeys I see," said Endicott.

"That's right,"

"And quite old by the look of them."

"I think you'll find they still work," said Callan.

"I'd better explain for the newcomers," said Marsden. "We usually shoot for five

hundred a gun—That is to say whoever makes the most hits takes the pool. You can enter more than one gun if you like.”

One'll do me, thought Callan, but all the others entered two, so two it had to be. Another thousand quid. Hunter must think I'm made of money, he thought.

They shot well, all of them, even better than he'd expected; but one by one they dropped out. First Marsden, made over-anxious by greed, then Minns, who was too cautious, then Endicott who was that little bit, that fatal little bit, too slow

Baumer, Lorimer and Callan were left, and now the clay-pigeons were coming up two at a time. A left and a right. And that took care of Lorimer, whose weakness was impatience.

With clay-pigeons, to fire too soon is as bad as firing too late. Baumer and Callan went on. The magnate's eyes and coordination were wonderful, and Callan began to wonder if he would ever miss. But he tired at last, and Callan didn't.

They walked back together to the house, and Baumer looked at Callan; at the too new, too ornate shooting clothes, the worn and elegant gun-case.

“This is the first time I ever lost here,” he said. “You're good.”

“Thank you,” said Callan.

“Better than good,” said Baumer. “You're a phenomenon, Mr. Callan.”

“I hope that's a compliment.” Callan said.

“I hope so too,” said Baumer.

“I looked all over,” Lonely said. “Nobody's got one, Mr. Callan.”

“You're, sure?”

“Positive,” said Lonely.

Callan said “Then we're in shtuck.”

“I did find something else though,” Lonely said.

When he told him what it was. Callan said : “I'm an idiot.”

Lonely thought it seemed a funny reason for Callan to give him another tenner

* * *

Next day was wood-pigeons ; the wariest and wiliest: bird target there is. One gun, a thousand pounds on it, and the winner was the one who shot the most pigeons. No dogs. Every man did his own retrieving. Go into the woods, find your own hide, and the best of British luck. As a way of setting up a shotgun accident couldn't be bettered.

Callan stayed as close as he dared to Baumer and bagged three pigeons, then Baumer went deeper into the wood. Callan thought this had to be the time he propped the Purdey against a tree, and crawled after him. A Ghurka had taught Callan about tracking years ago in the jungles of Malaya and Callan had never forgotten his lessons. He made no more noise than his own shadow and finished up at last behind a bush ten yards away from Baumer. Waiting. The most nerve-racking part of his trade.

Then Baumer got one, and moved forward to fetch it as a tall figure appeared

in the clearing behind him. A .38 magnum revolver appeared in Callan's hand and the tall figure moved forward and called out, "Baumer."

Baumer was already turning as Callan yelled. "Don't move. Mr. Baumer," and stood up to face the tall man who looked at the magnum revolver as if it couldn't possibly be happening, then his gun hand tensed, and Callan said, "Don't try it. Not with that thing"

Baumer said, "May I turn now?"

"Just be careful," said Callan.

Baumer turned, and looked at the weapon in Lorimer's hand. Two barrels and a handgrip, like an eighteenth-century pistol.

"Who are you supposed to be, Mr. Lorimer? Dick Turpin?" Baumer asked,

"That's a sawn-off shotgun," said Callan. "A bit clumsy. but it'll kill you just as well as the big one. Easier to manage too, if you were faking an accident. Lay down, Lorimer." Lorimer made no move.

Baumer said "How much were they paying you son?"

"Enough," said Lorimer.

"Well, well," Baumer said. "And you a gentleman."

"One thing I've learned," said Lorimer, "is that no-one can be a gentleman without capital. Surely you know that?"

He turned away from them, and Callan raised the magnum, but before he could use it the sawn-off shotgun roared and Lorimer fell. Callan walked over to him and took away the gun, then locked around for Lorimer's shotgun, eased it into his hands, and tried not to look at what was left of Lorimer's face.

"At least, he died like a gentleman," said Baumer. "How did you know, son?"

"We had a tip one of them was after you," said Callan. "A mate of mine looked the guests over—looking for a handgun." He hefted the sawn-off shotgun. "He found this instead."

"Who's 'we'? "said Baumer. "Shin Beth?"

"Sort of," said Callan.

"They told me someone was after me too." Baumer said,

"Perhaps next time you'll listen to them," said Callan, and turned towards the house, "Shalom."

"Lorimer?" Hunter said. "You're quite sure?"

"I saw him try it," said Callan.

"You—arranged things."

"Yeah," said Callan. "He tripped over a stump and his gun went off. Blew his head away. Very nasty."

"And the sawn-off shotgun?" Callan put it on his desk.

"Did you happen to notice the shotgun you left by the body?"

"Yeah," said Callan. "It was a Purdey. Looked a lot like yours."

"It was," said Hunter. "His grandfather and my father ordered their guns on the same day."

File on an Angry Artist - March 18th 1973

"A painter?" said Callan. "You mean art?"

"I do," said Hunter.

"But I don't even know what I like"

"Then this will be an excellent opportunity for you to find out, Hunter said.

He threw the file across the desk to Callan; yellow cover—surveillance only. The name on the cover was Richard Hodge. Callan turned to the first page and looked at the photograph of what seemed to be an angry and very muscular hippy.

"Never heard of him" he said.

"Perhaps you have heard of his brother Brian? Worked in the Foreign Office. . . Middle East Desk. He stole some papers about the Trucial States. What force we use to preserve our Interests there. One of the oil sheiks offered him a fortune for them."

"Didn't he commit suicide? Shot himself?"

Hunter looked at his fingernails.

"It appeared so," he said. "Meres was very close to him."

Callan said, "So either way it was suicide."

Hunter said, "Quite so. . . But Meres didn't get the papers back — And Hodge and his brother got on well."

"You want me to find out if he's got them?"

"Yes," said Hunter. "He may not have them of course. That's why his file's surveillance only."

"And if he has got them? "

"I want to talk to him," said Hunter.

He took the file from Callan, looked at Hodge's strong, scowling face.

"Perhaps then he'll merit a red file," he said. "By the look of him it would be more appropriate colour."

NEW suit, ready made but expensive, and just a little vulgar; handmade shoes, a tie that didn't quite belong with the shirt—or the suit. Money, credit card, cheque-book, a gold fountain pen that was very vulgar indeed, but no gun. Not for a surveillance job; not yet.

Callan looked at himself in the mirror and was satisfied. Risen from humble circumstances to affluence, he thought, and doesn't care who knows it. The wear of this suit doesn't go to an art exhibition to criticise, he thought; he goes to try.

The gallery was a long way from Mayfair, which meant, so the expert had told him, that Richard Hodge hadn't arrived yet. On the other hand he was lucky to be having an exhibition at all with all the competition there was these days. Unless he'd financed it himself.

Such things had been known to happen. . . but not to Richard Hodge, thought Callan. Not unless he'd found a new and wealthy friend. On his file it had said

"Income and Assets: Virtually nil. Occasional recourse to National Assistance."

He parked the rented Mercedes across the street, and looked across at the gallery. "A. J. Meyler," It said. "Paintings, Sculptures, Objets d'Art." A clean shop and a tidy one by the look of it, but not a prosperous one. He left the car and crossed to the shop window.

It held one painting: a violent explosion of red, yellow, and black; jagged lines across an agonised and writhing background. "Animus One," he read. "Richard Hodge," and beside it a neatly lettered card, "Richard Hodge Exhibition." He went inside.

He didn't know quite what he'd expected: dark drapes, perhaps; easels of expensive wood, and a bunch of trendies sipping champagne.

What he got was an almost empty room, its only asset the very effective lighting that flattered the pictures on the walls. A young man and woman in paint-smudged jeans stood in front of one picture and argued; a girl in a kaftan and beads, sat behind a desk reading *The Kama Sutra*, and that was it.

As Callan walked past her she handed him a catalogue without taking her eyes from the page. The illustration she was looking at made more sense than the pictures on the walls at that, thought Callan. At least you could tell what it was supposed to be about.

He began to look at the pictures. "Animus Two." "Animus Three." "Vietnam Massacre." "Bloody Sunday." This geezer had a one-track mind. But it got to you eventually, all that striving and strength and rage. And in between, sketches and drawings, whatever you call them. Mostly male and mostly nude, and muscled like giants. Callan moved on, and the two paint-smudged figures chanted like a litany. "No sense of massing." "But the rhythm's Strong." "Oh certainly. If only the colour—"

"But it isn't, is it?"

Callan looked at yet another furious painting, and a voice behind him said "Powerful don't you think?"

He turned quickly, to confront a neat and worried-looking man, who was making frantic "Shut-up" signals to the paint-stained ones.

A. J. Meyler, Callan thought. He needs a new suit, but at least he can recognise a customer. He looked again at the picture, which was called "Holocaust."

"Is that what it's supposed to be?" he said.

"My dear sir—that's what it is," the man said. "Observe the use of massing, the urgency of the rhythm, the inexorable use of colour—."

On their way to the door the paint-stained ones sniggered, but the cultured salesman's patter went frantically on till Callan said: "None of this means a thing to me. Not a bloody thing."

"Oh dear," said A. J. Meyler

"It's the wife, you see." said Callan.

"The wife?"

"My wife," Callan said. "She saw one of these catalogues a friend of hers got. She fancies this stuff."

"But you don't?"

"Can't make head or tail of it," said Callan.

~~For a moment it seemed as if A. J. Meyler would warm to him. but then the gloom returned.~~

"Perhaps if your wife were to come here herself—"

"Can't do that," said Callan. "I'm buying her one of these for her birthday. Surprise like. But I'm damned if I know which one."

A. J. Meyler looked at him as at a fellow sufferer. "Perhaps if I may suggest—" he began.

Behind them a voice said, "Don't bother—"

Callan turned more slowly this time. It was Richard Hodge all right, and he must have been moving damn quietly. Callan looked down at Hodge's feet. They were bare.

"You," Hodge said, nodding at Callan, "Out."

"Mr. Hodge, really," Meyler said.

Hodge moved in closer. "You heard me," he said. "Out. Before I put you put,"

He's big all right, Callan thought. Six two and a chest like a barrel. I bet he never lost a fight in his life.

Aloud he said. "You bloody fool.' I've come to buy something."

"Not from me you haven't," said Hodge.

"And why the hell not? Don't you think I've got the money to pay for it?"

"Money?" Hodge said. "Of course you've got money. Money's all that, bastard like you believe in . . . All you bloody well respect."

The girl behind the desk took her nose out of *The Kama Sutra* to nod approval.

"Well then?"

"These pictures are my work," Hodge said. "My whole life. Do you think I'm going to sell one to somebody who comes in here and says he can't make head or tail of it—just because he's got money?"

Callan said : "It's not for me. It's for my wife."

"If she's stupid enough to marry you," said Hodge, "she's too stupid to appreciate that picture. Now then. Are you going?"

"No," said Callan. "I'm not. You'll have to put me out."

"Gentlemen. Please," said Meyler, and Hodge moved forward. Callan stepped back and took hold of "Holocaust" by its frame.

"Suit yourself, son," he said. "If you don't mind your picture getting damaged" Hodge stopped dead.

"You wouldn't dare," he said.

"One way to find out," said Callan,

"I'd kill you for that."

Callan said; "That wouldn't mend the picture."

Hodge looked at him and said. "You mean it, I swear to God you mean it."

Callan gave no answer and suddenly Hodge threw back his shaggy head and bellowed with laughter.

"For God's sake, put the picture down before you drop it," he said. "I like you man. I really do." He turned to Meyler. "Any of that champagne left?"

"A bottle or two," said Meyler.

"Bring it," Hodge said, "Let's all have a drink. This one's got guts and money. I didn't think that was possible."

The champagne was Taittinger, a Blanc de Blancs, but they drank it out of two beer glasses and a tooth mug. The girl behind the desk got hers in a cup. It tasted delicious, but she didn't let it interfere with her reading. Hodge knocked his back in one smacking gulp, topped up his glass, and Callan's, then put an arm round his shoulders.

"Now," he said, "let me give you some art education." He talked, and Callan listened: art was struggle, art was violence, art was—if struggle and violence succeeded—liberation. Half an hour and two bottles later Callan allowed himself to be convinced, and looked rather blearily at the pictures. One of them had a little red sticker affixed to the frame. That, he said, was the one he liked.

"Sorry chum," Hodge said. "The sticker means it's sold."

"But I like it," said Callan, swaying just a little.

"So did the bloke who bought it. Don't you like any of the others

"Course I do," Callan said "Like 'em all. But that there—it's liber-li-liberated."

He stopped and shook his head.

"That must have been good champagne," he said.

Hodge laughed. Even his laughter was aggressive.

"I like you," he said. "I really do. What's your name?"

"Matt Jackson."

"Come round to a party tonight, Matt. Maybe we can take another look at my pictures afterwards."

"Suits me," said Callan.

"If I was you I wouldn't bring your wife," said Hodge.

"That suits me an' all"

"I do like you," Hodge said "Tell you what—if I still like you tonight—I'll give you a picture for nothing."

A. J. Meyler winced.

"An artist?" said Lonely.

"That's right," said Callan.

"Does he have any models?"

"What a dirty minded little man you are," said Callan.

"Nothing dirty about it." Lonely said. "Beauty unadorned. It's art, that is."

His eyes had the same look as when they beheld a plate of fish and chips with vinegar on.

"Mostly he draws fellers." Callan said.

"Oh," said Lonely, disappointed. "A poof."

"If he is he takes exercises." said Callan. "You want, to watch him son"

He showed Lonely a photograph of Hodge: at once there came the familiar terrible smell.

"He'd eat me," said Lonely.

"If he saw you were tailing him—but he won't. You're good son."

"I don't know that I'm that good."

"I do," said Callan, "and I'm the judge."

Lonely sighed.

"A hundred nicker," he said. "If he spots me it'll pay for me funeral."

Callan handed over money, and Lonely counted briskly. Suddenly he stopped.

"Suppose there's fighting?" he said.

"Suppose there is," said Callan.

"Well I mean—look at him."

"If there's fighting," Callan said, "I promise you won't be there to see it. You might put me off. Now—tell me again what you have to do."

They met again later at a pub in Notting Hill. Lonely's first pint disappeared in one urgent swallow and Callan ordered another, sipped his tomato juice.

"Thirsty work, tailing," said Lonely, and looked at Callan's drink. "You given up then, Mr. Callan?"

"I'm in training," said Callan. Lonely shuddered, "Don't start," said Callan. "Just tell me about Hodge."

"Left the gallery about six," said Lonely. "Went to a caff."

"What caff?"

"The Oasis," Lonely said. Marble Arch way. Had some grub with a Paki. Stuff called cous-cous. Looked like semolina to me."

"It is," said Callan.

"Disgusting," said Lonely "They ate meat with it."

"You're sure it was a Pakistani?"

"Looked like one," said Lonely. "Kept going on about his master."

"What about him? "

"Said he'd sent the money and Hodge would get it tomorrow, so it was time he delivered."

"What then?"

"I went to Hodge's place like you told me."

"Find anything?" Lonely shook his head. It was a disappointment, but Callan had been prepared for disappointment.

"All right, old son," Callan said. "You're doing well. Just, one more job and you're finished. You know where to find me?"

"Yes." said Lonely. "You'll be among the models. They can't all be fellers."

Callan watched him go, then went to a phone, and dialled the number he would never forget.

"Yes?" the girl's voice said.

"Let me speak to Charlie please." said Callan; then Hunter came on, and he told him what he wanted.

The party was noisy, drunken, psychedelically lit. Hodge had crammed more than 50 people into his basement flat, and it, bulged. Callan stumbled across

couples of indeterminate sex who appeared oblivious to everything: even the record of a pop group that apparently used sledge-hammers and anvils instead of drums. At last he reached Hodge, who stood with a girl on each arm.

"Matt," he said. "Good to see you. Here. Have one of these."

His massive forearm moved, and one of the girls was in Callan's arms. She giggled, and kissed him, and Callan was aware of the acrid smell of pot.

"I'm a good host," said Hodge. "I look after my guests. Find you a place to lie down if you like."

"When I'm ready I'll find my own," Callan said.

"I don't know when I liked anybody so much," Hodge said.

The party went on and on and on. The girl Callan held went to sleep for a while but revived after she'd drunk Callan's whisky. In one corner a group argued about Zen Buddhism, in another a group passed round a joint as if it were a religious ritual and all the time the music pounded like artillery.

Callan's girl said she was hot and took off her dress. Half-naked, she looked so vulnerable as a child. Callan gave her more whisky, and she went back to sleep.

He was still holding her when Lonely came in. Callan had never seen the little man look so reproachful.

"Fellers," he said.

"Let's have it," said Callan, and Lonely told him.

As he finished, Hodge came up, and glared at Lonely.

"I'm bloody sure I didn't invite you," he said.

Carefully Callan put aside the sleeping girl, and rose.

"It's my foreman," he said. "Hope you don't mind, I told him where I was. One of the machines is acting up."

"Trouble up at mill, eh?" said Hodge.

"Something like that. I'll have to go there—but I'd like to look at them pictures again first. I could be tied up for a bit."

Hodge said, "Meyler's here. I'll get the keys."

He went off, and crossed the room.

Lonely said, "Thanks Mr. Callan," then stiffened. "Over there," he said. "By the fireplace. It's the Paki."

Callan looked quickly at him; dark and lean, drinking coke. The room's only loner.

"I thought it might be," he said. "Only he's an Arab. Cover me will you."

Lonely moved in front of him, and Callan's hands were fast and precise. He pulled up one trouser leg and shifted the gun that was taped to his calf to his trousers' waistband.

"Funny place for a shooter," said Lonely.

"Not if you're rumbled with a bird," said Callan. "You push off, old son."

Lonely looked at the sleeping girl.

"Might as well," he said. "Nobody's asked me to stay here."

Then he left, and Hodge came back with the shop keys. As he and Callan crossed the room, the Arab put down his glass left-handed.

~~HODGE~~ opened the door, and motioned Callan to enter. When he followed, he left the door unlocked, but that, Callan was sure, was carelessness, no more.

"Now," he said. "Pick where you like."

Callan nodded to the red sticker. "I still like that one," he said.

"Matt—I Keep telling you— It's sold," said Hodge.

"Yeah," said Callan. "To an oil sheik. How much is he paying for it—a million?"

Hodge leaped for him then, and Callan met him with a karate kick to the stomach, a kick controlled so that Hodge wouldn't die, though the agony it caused might make him want to. Hodge screamed and staggered in front of Callan as the shop door flew open, the Arab leaped in and fired. Hodge screamed again, and Callan swerved round him, and the Arab turned too late. The magnum spoke once and the Arab fell.

Afterwards, the neighbours agreed, the ambulance arrived with commendable promptitude. As it should have done, thought Callan. Meres had been waiting long enough for the gun-shots. A. J. Meyler offered a reward for the Hodge painting that was stolen, but he never saw it again—or Hodge either.

* * *

"HE HAD the papers between the painting and the frame," said Callan. "He was sending the whole lot to the Arab sheik—that's how I got on to it. Lonely broke into the shop and found the case for it already addressed."

"Did you have trouble making him tell you?"

"No," said Callan. "I said I'd rip the painting to bits if he didn't tell me. He told me at once."

"It's a terrible painting," said Hunter.

"He doesn't think so," Callan said.

"Did he say anything else?"

"Yeah," said Callan. "He did. He said he didn't like me any more."

File on a Reckless Rider - March 25th 1973

"Enjoying yourself?" Hunter asked.

"Not much," said Callan. He thrust his hands deeper into the pockets of his overcoat. "Too bloody cold" he said.

"They do choose rather bleak places for these country meetings I agree," said Hunter. "Still—there's something about an amateur steeplechase." He looked about him. A vast expanse of downland with a race track sketchily laid out, the jumps delivered by lorry; and instead of a stand the gleaming cars of the rich drawn up in line to cheer on their equals. The three bookies with the stamina to stand the cold stuck out like Martians: and so do I, thought Callan.

"I've lost eight quid" he said.

"Allowable on expenses," said Hunter.

Callan said: "I don't like losing money to bookies. Even your money."

Hunter sighed, "Try Pretty Lady in the next one," he said. "A friend of mine owns her, and chap called Lawson's riding her. He's the best amateur jockey I've ever seen."

Pretty Lady, with Lawson up, led all the way and came in by six lengths at 100 to 8. Callan began to feel better.

"Lunch, I think," said Hunter. "Unless you'd care to place another bet."

"Lunch" said Callan. "I know when I'm well off."

He lugged the picnic basket into the car. Hot soup in a flask, cold salmon, cold beef, salad, apple pie, a bottle of Beaune. When Hunter did things in style, he didn't mess about.

"I take it you don't ride." Hunter said

"If you mean horses, you know I don't," said Callan

"That's why I brought you here." said Hunter. "To get the feel of the thing. These people—" he gestured at the car window, taking in the fur coats, the British warms, shooting sticks, tartan rugs, the nervous expensive horseflesh and the well-born jockeys shivering in their silks—"These people are members of a hunt. I occasionally ride with them myself. For the most part they are rich, well-connected, successful—and on the subject of horses completely insane. You are not like that."

"In no way," said Callan.

"In one way only. You are successful. That is why I brought you here. I wish you to observe them."

"Don't tell me you want me to knock off a horse?" said Callan.

"Hunter sighed, then sipped his Beaune. "Whatever target I give you will be human," he said. "If indeed I give you one at all."

Callan looked at him. Hunter unsure of what he wanted was a rare sight indeed.

"Last month a man was murdered at a point-to-point meeting of this very hunt," Hunter said. "Perhaps you read about."

"Chap called Lyndhurst" said Callan, "Some bloke shot him with a rifle."

Hunter looked again at the window. A line of horses thundered past, kicking up

divots, then streamed over a fence, floating in air. One horse pecked, and horse and rider went down, and Hunter waited in silence until they got up and the rider remounted, set the horse at the jump once more, and cleared it.

"Sir Francis Lyndhurst" he said. "Amiable but vacuous. Shot dead from cover with a high-velocity rifle. Murderer unknown. But the Press got a stream of pamphlets. Perhaps you remember?"

"If the fox, then why not the , hunter?" Callan quoted. "I remember; all right. Sounded a bit too close to home for me."

Hunter grimaced.

"I was aware of it myself," he said. "Then there was some rigmarole about the evil of blood sports, and a life for a life. No further threats, and no confession of murder, but the Press drew its own conclusions, as did the public. The hunt was unimpressed. They met—and killed—next day."

"And nothing happened"

"Nothing," said Hunter.

"A nutter," said Callan. "It has to be."

Hunter poured more Beaune. "I hope so," he said.

Outside, the bookies were bawling the odds as if it were good news and the horses moved slowly, insolently from the parade towards the start and turned at once into nervous prima donnas whom the tape made more nervous still.

But it went up at last to the ritual cry of "They're off," and the field slowly lengthened, the huddle of silks that, had looked like a shattered rainbow resolved into individual colours as the leading horses gathered themselves for the first fence.

"Number eight's the one to watch," said Hunter "Morrison. He's joint master Beautiful hands."

The first horse cleared, then the second and third, and Morrison, lying fourth came into the jump, the big grey he was riding took off effortlessly.

Callan put his glasses on it. Beautiful, he thought. Expensive, useless, maybe even stupid, but beautiful. Then at the height of the jump Morrison seemed to stiffen, the reins fell from his hands, and as the big grey landed he slumped sideways, one boot came free, his body fell like a stone as the grey galloped on dragging him along the ground. In the crowd, a woman screamed.

"Let us hope he had a heart attack." said Hunter.

Callan said "He was shot."

Hunter sighed. "You would know," he said and left the car.

Callan finished his wine, and waited. Someone caught the grey by the bridle, men came running with a hurdle, and winced when they saw what was left of Morrison's face. An ambulance arrived, then one by one the cars left, some of them towing horse-boxes. The race was abandoned.

And still Callan waited, and brooded about the sniper. Got him from the side, he thought. In that clump of trees. All the cover, in the world. Three hundred yards range, telescopic sights. If you knew your business there was nothing to it. And the geezer knew his business. Must have done. Callan had seen it through his glasses

One shot. Straight through the brain.

~~Then off as soon as he'd fired, take the gun apart, and into a car behind the trees—or better still a motor-bike - kick the starter and away we go. Piece of cake and no way at all of stopping it as far as he could see. Then Hunter came back and they drove back to town, Callan told him about his broodings.~~

Hunter said "I'll pass it on," and picked up the radio-telephone, dialled Section H.Q. Callan heard him talk to the secretary, then waited as Hunter listened, said "Thank you, Liz." and turned to Callan.

"More pamphlets to the Press," he said. "Delivered just after the shooting. Same as the last time. "If the fox, why not the hunter? "With one addition—'Why they never learn?' "

"It has to be a nutter." said Callan.

Hunter said "Enderby rides with that hunt."

"Enderby?"

"Foreign Office," said Hunter "What they call a trouble-shooter nowadays. Middle East specialist Bright chap .Very bright. When the Egyptians kicked the Russians out—Enderby helped set it up. The Russians hate him."

"The sniper didn't knock him off."

"He wasn't riding." said Hunter "On either occasion. If he had been—and my theory is right—they'd still have spared him. They want this to look like the work of a maniac."

Callan said "But it he isn't riding—"

"He will be next week." said Hunter. "The Hunt Committee held an emergency meeting There's a meet next week—it won't be cancelled."

"They must be out of their minds," said Callan

Hunter said, "I thought I told you. On the subject of horses—they are.". He turned to Callan. "Enderby mustn't die, David," he said.

"Then tell him not to ride."

"I already have." said Hunter. "He refused."

"Have him kidnapped."

"I should like to, very much." said Hunter. "Unfortunately he's aware of it. And much too clever to allow it to happen. I want you to go to Langham."

"Where's that?"

"Langham Hall." said Hunter. They meet there next Thursday. Lord Langham is the surviving joint-master. He is also a friend of mine. I arranged it with him before I left."

Callan said ; "Come off it. The last thing I rode was a donkey at the sea-side."

"You will go as an old friend of Langham's son Charles. He was killed in Malaya. You've always wanted to watch a hunt—and that's why you're there."

Callan said "Be reasonable, Hunter It just isn't possible to stop a sniper."

"I know it isn't," said Hunter. "But I want you to try. Whatever you may need of course—"

Toby Meres rides," said Callan.

"He does."

"I'll need him for a start". He thought for a while. "And I think it's about time"

Langham had a new stable hand."

"Anything else?"

"I'll let you know."

Hunter said: "I'm obliged to you," then thought for a moment. "How much do you win on Pretty Lady?"

"Fifty quid," said Callan.

"Which will be deducted from your expenses."

"Oh no it won't," said Callan. I bet my own money."

Lord Langham was 73, and as lean and tough as a riding-crop. On foot he looked 60, and on Horseback 45. Whatever Hunter's told him about me must have been good, Callan thought. He doesn't even mind that I can't ride.

That night they dined twenty at dinner and of them all only Callan, Lawson, the rider of Pretty Lady and his sister were not to ride next day. Lawson was teased unmercifully about that. He'd taken a fall when out walking and dislocated his hip. His sister pushed him around in a wheelchair.

Callan watched him when the port came round, and the real teasing began. Lawson took it well enough but the smile on his lips never quite reached his eyes.

If he had the chance. Callan thought, he'd get on a horse tomorrow; still bandages and all. His whole life seemed directed down one channel only: the mastery of a beast for the killing of another beast, and anything else, even having to cope with the schoolboy teasing of men with less than half his skill, was something he couldn't hope to cope with—ever. Strength, mastery, the kill. These were all he cared about. All he knew.

At last Langham relented and took them to join the ladies.

Almost at once, one of them joined Callan: Logon's sister pushed her brother to him in his chair.

"So you don't ride tomorrow either, Mr. Callan?" he said.

"No," said Callan. "I never have, and I think it's a little late to start now."

"But you like watching a meet?"

"Ask me tomorrow" Callan said. "I've never seen one."

Miss Lawson said "But how on earth will you pass the time? Follow on foot?"

"No." Callan said. "I'll watch them set out, then go to the library. Lord Langham's got some stuff there I find fascinating."

"Wouldn't you like to watch the kill?" Lawson asked.

"No," said Callan. "Not any more, I'll stay with the picturesque."

"I'm sorry if I seem inquisitive." Miss Lawson said, "but I can't help wondering —"

"Why I bother to come here?"

"I suppose that's rude. I'm sorry."

"Not at all," said Callan. "It's just that I'm fascinated by things I don't understand." They left him then, and Meres came over to Callan.

"Mixing with the nobs?" he said.

"They're just pitying a poor peasant," said Callan.

“Pitying?”

“I don’t ride,” said Callan.

Meres said, “And I do.” He looked again at Miss Lawson “I might chance my arm myself—if I survive tomorrow. You still want me to stay close to Enderby?”

“As close as you can get,” said Callan.

Meres said “I hope that sniper’s as good as you say he is—damn you.”

He moved away, and Calian left the room and went out of the house toward the stables. The night was chill, the stars brilliant and tiny, the air so clear after London that he breathed it deeply and gratefully. Then, suddenly, the air was far from clear. Callan stopped, a bush rustled softly and Lonely was with him.

“I might have known it would be you” said Callan.

Lonely said: “Of course it’s me. You told me to meet you here. . . You better not come too close, Mr. Callan. I think I’m niffing a bit.”

“You’re the expert,” said Callan.

“Mr. Callan, that’s not fair.” said Lonely. “Nerves is one thing and horses is another. Horses is disgusting. I tell you straight, that’s the last time I’m working in a stable, even for what you say you’re going to pay me.”

Callan made soothing noises and handed over money, and had no doubt, that Lonely would count it. Lonely could count money anywhere, even in the dark,

“Just right, Mr. Callan,” he said at last. “Ta.”

“What you got?” said Callan.

“According to the grooms they’re all good shots.” said Lonely, “Even some of the birds. Up in Scotland,” he added vaguely. “Stags and grouse and that.”

“Lawson?”

He’s supposed to be the best.” said Lonely.

“D’you, find out who’s hard up?”

“To hear them talk you’d think they all were,” said Lonely. “Don’t know where their next fifty thousand’s coming from.”

“Anyone in particular?” said Callan.

“Lawson again,” said Lonely. “And his sister. Gambling mad they are.”

“Thanks old son,” said Callan.

Lonely said : “Can I go now Mr. Callan? I want to have a bath.”

“Off you go,” said Callan.

As he moved into the darkness Lonely said : “Do you think after-shave would do any good?”

* * *

The meet was splendid—all Surtees and sporting prints and old-fashioned Christmas-cards—pink coats and thoroughbreds and eager, impatient hounds. To Callan it seemed an awkward and viciously expensive way to save the price of a few hens, but that presumably was the wrong way to look at it; the object of the exercise was pleasure.

He stood with the Lawsons as Langham swigged down his stirrup cup and nodded to the whipper-in, and the hounds moved off, the horsemen followed

Meres just behind Enderby's right shoulder: the bodyguard position, but even Meres had never bodyguarded on horseback before. . . At least they've got gut thought Callan. Not one of them, either last night or this morning, has even mentioned the sniper. He looked down at Lawson in his wheel-chair.

"What will you do now, Mr. Lawson?" he asked.

"Go back to bed." his sister said. "He says his hip is aching dreadfully."

Lawson said "She's a bully, Callan. She always was."

"Be that as it may," she said. "bed's the place for you."

She pushed the wheel-chair into the house. "Enjoy your reading, Mr. Callan."

Callan went to the library, then out through the French window to where Lone had left his scooter, and rode it through the lodge-gates to the stretch of common where the helicopter was waiting. The pilot opened the door, and Callan looked round approvingly.

"No spectators?" he said.

"All watching the hunt." the pilot said. "We did have a few, but I told them I was filming the meet for television. They said old Langham would have me flogged if I scared the horses—then they took off pretty quick. Guilt by association, or something. Ready?"

Callan took the old Mannlicher rifle from under the seat and tested it carefully. Getting on for 50 years old, and even better than the day it was made. Action balance, telescopic sight, all perfect. The best big game rifle he had ever handled. He loaded the magazine, then fastened his safety belt. "Ready," he said.

The helicopter clattered, roared, lifted off in an ungainly lunge as the pilot sought the height that would give them maximum view, and Callan looked down. The hounds had found, and were streaming across bare winter fields, the hunters pounding after, clearing each obstacle as it came.

A horse went down, and another, and Callan reached for his glasses but Enderby was still there, with Meres hard behind him. By the look of things Enderby was telling Meres exactly what he thought about people who rode too close. But they were bunched in among other riders anyway— no need to worry yet.

Then Lord Langham, just ahead of Enderby, looked up and shook his fist at the helicopter and his horse slowed. Enderby and Meres shot ahead. Callan looked to where a deserted cottage stood, windows gone, roof tumbled in. Beside it was a metalled road.

Callan touched the pilot's arm and pointed—no use trying to shout above the racket of the rotor blades—and the helicopter moved abruptly as a dragon fly. Callan eased back the sliding door, picked up the Mannlicher.

Through the gaping hole of the cottage roof he saw a flash of blue and chrome—a motor bike—and he nudged the pilot again, his thumb pointed imperatively down.

He risked one glance at the horsemen.—Enderby had left Meres at last and was galloping alone, his hunting pink a perfect target,—then back to the cottage. By the window a figure crouched, a figure in worn tweeds with a rifle in its hands.

The sniper risked one look at the helicopter, then coolly, as unconcerned as if it wasn't there, took aim at Enderby. Callan lifted the Mannlicher and fired, and the

tweeded figure fell. Enderby galloped on unaware, and the pilot sought flat ground, touched down the helicopter, the noise of its blades fading from a clatter to a whistling sigh.

“Bloody nerve.” the pilot said. “Setting up a killing with us watching.”

“If I know that geezer he’d have had a go at us next,” Callan said. “He didn’t want witnesses. Let’s take a look at him.”

They walked towards the cottage, and Callan took the Mannlicher with him. He didn’t pay to take chances with a bloke like that. As they reached the cottage, the pilot said : “Who is it anyway?”

“A bloke called Lawson,” Callan said.

The pilot peered inside.

“I hate to contradict you, old boy,” he said, “but it’s a lady.”

Callan looked, and felt sick

“A lady called Lawson.” he said. , “Her brother must really have dislocated his hip.”

“What now?” said the pilot.

“We put her in the helicopter,” Callan said. “We can’t leave her here, not with a hole in her head.”

“You dropped her of course.” said Hunter. “Where?”

“In the Channel,” said Callan. “Five miles out.”

Hunter said, “I’ve spoken to her brother. He’s quite innocent.”

“Does he know—?”

“That she’s dead? . . . No. I told him she must have realised we were on to her—and run away.”

“What made her do it, Hunter?”

“Money,” Hunter said. “The K.G.B.’s money. And quite a lot of it—according to her bank account. Most probably he’ll inherit it eventually. I’ve no objection.”

“And I thought it was him all the time,” said Callan.

I know you did. May I ask why?”

“He was a perfect target on Pretty Lady—a far easier shot than Morrison—and yet the sniper didn’t take it.”

“She would hardly shoot her own brother,” Hunter said.

“It never occurred to me she would shoot anybody at all,” said Callan.

“Then it should have done.” said Hunter. “You were really rather lucky in this one, David.”

“Lucky.” said Callan. “Yeah it’s not every day I get a chance to shoot a lady.”

File on a Weeping Widow - April 1st 1973

"How are you getting on?" said Hunter.

"All right" said Callan.

"The lady likes you then?"

"Seems like it."

Hunter sighed. "This isn't the time for maidenly coyness, Callan," he said. "I put you on to Pamela Ramirez for a reason."

"Yeah," said Callan. "So I gathered. She's in a red file."

"And you like her?" said Hunter.

"I like her."

"Then perhaps it's about time I told you that I'm not sure whether she belongs in a red file or not."

Watch it, Callan thought. He's about to get tricky.

"How many times have you seen her?" Hunter asked.

Seven, was it? Eight? The set up encounter on the plane from Rome, the dinner that night; two theatres, three cocktail parties, and one more dinner. Hunter ticked them off. "Eight," he said.

"And she believes you are—what you say you are?"

"Philbin Enterprises Ltd. Export and Import. Robert Philbin, Managing Director" said Callan. "Yeah. She believes it. Why not? It's what it says on my card." Hunter's voice was bitter.

Hunter said "I shouldn't have to say this—not to you, but don't like her too much, David."

"You want me to kill her?"

Hunter said testily "I've told you already. I don't know whether she belongs in a red file or not—so how can I possibly answer that question?"

"What do you want me to do then?"

"What has she told you about her late husband?" Hunter asked,

"Nothing."

"Not one word? Ever?" Callan shook his head. "Very well then. What do you know?"

"Enrique Ramirez" said Callan. "South American parents—brought up in Italy. Racing driver—and bloody good. Last year he was all set to be world champion, for the second year running—only he crashed instead. Car blew up. He died—and left her a lot of money."

"She also inherited his red file," said Hunter. Callan thought for a moment.

"It wasn't an accident, then?"

"No," Hunter said. "It was very carefully arranged."

"What was he up to?" Callan asked.

"He was a K.G.B. courier," Hunter said.

"He was a Red?"

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