RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Worm of Death

Nicholas Blake

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About the Book

Several days after private detective and poet Nigel Strangeways dines with Dr Piers Loudron and his family, the doctor vanishes, only for his legless corpse to be fished out of the river Thames. When his family ask Nigel to protect their interests during the police investigation, it soon becomes apparent that each member of the deceased’s family, from his adopted son to his daughter’s unpleasant fiancée, had a strong motive for killing him.

As the winter fog swirls outside, Nigel must find his way through a maze of conflicting stories, missing diaries and red herrings.

About the Author

Nicholas Blake was the pseudonym of Poet Laureate Cecil Day-Lewis, who was born in County Laois, Ireland, in 1904. After his mother died in 1906, he was brought up in London by his father, spending summer holidays with relatives in Wexford. He was educated at Sherborne School and Wadham College, Oxford, from which he graduated in 1927. Blake initially worked as a teacher to supplement his income from his poetry writing and he published his first Nigel Strangeways novel, *A Question of Proof*, in 1935. Blake went on to write a further nineteen crime novels, all but four of which featured Nigel Strangeways, as well as numerous poetry collections and translations.

During the Second World War he worked as a publications editor in the Ministry of Information, which he used as the basis for the Ministry of Morale in *Minute for Murder*, and after the war he joined the publishers Chatto & Windus as an editor and director. He was appointed Poet Laureate in 1968 and died in 1972 at the home of his friend, the writer Kingsley Amis.

Also by Nicholas Blake

A Question of Proof
Thou Shell of Death
There's Trouble Brewing
The Beast Must Die
The Widow's Cruise
Malice in Wonderland
The Case of the Abominable Snowman
The Smiler with the Knife
Minute for Murder
Head of a Traveller
The Dreadful Hollow
The Whisper in the Gloom
End of Chapter
The Sad Variety
The Morning After Death

NICHOLAS BLAKE

The Worm of Death

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

NOTE TO THE READER

I have taken three liberties in this book: (a) to alter the weather of February, 1960; (b) to build a house where no house is—on a certain quay in East Greenwich; and (c) to install Dr. Piers Loudron, his daughter and two of his sons, in my own house at Greenwich.

N.B.

CHAPTER I

Last Entry—In Part

. . . SO THERE IT is. He intends to kill me. And I must let him kill me. I've slept on it, and that is my conclusion. I owe it to him—or rather, to her.

I hope, when the time comes (to-night? to-morrow? next week?), I shall have the resolution not to resist—life-and-death scuffles are so ignominious. But shall I? Interesting. Mind over matter; and in my experience matter wins every time.

It all depends how, I dare say. Poison? Enough lethal drugs in the dispensary to put down half my patients. No doubt he'd like to *see* me expire—justice must be seen to be done—an eye for an eye—that's our Jewish blood. But, since he does not know that I intend to go like a lamb to the slaughter, he'd be afraid of my denouncing him *in extremis*.

What then? Bullet, knife, strangling, gas, blunt instrument, a strong push into the river? There are so many possibilities I must be on my guard not to guard against.

Knowing him, I know it will be something cold and cunning. Yes, and *apt*—the punishment fitting the crime: the emotionally retarded, immaturable sort of mind works in that sort of adolescent symbolism. Crude. The poetry of the primitive, the poetic justice of the child.

Oh, my child, our child.

Should I appeal to him, not to his heart—he has none now, where I am concerned—but to his self-interest? It would be total humiliation; but worse, a humiliation in vain, for he is implacable. It's not merely what he said. It's how he said it, how he looked: I am not the best diagnostician in

S.E. London for nothing, I have always known mortal illness when I saw it—a man's death first lifting up its little worm's head within him; and now I know the look of a man set upon another's death—the look which only his victim sees, and which so many victims fail to recognise.

Self-interest! He has only one self-interest now. A monomania. To destroy me. Let him.

> *Thou shalt not be killed, but needs't not strive*
> *Officiously to stay alive*.

Yes, that's all very amusing and intrepid. But the morality of it? Do I consider it a good thing, in the interests of justice—personal justice as between him and me—to let him become, through my own passivity, a murderer? Ought I not to protect him from himself by protecting myself from him? A nice point in ethics.

If one believed in the soul, in eternal damnation, there would be no problem. But I do not.

If I loved him, love might tell me the right answer. But evidently I do not: it's what he represents for me—there's the bond, the beautiful, ingrown, paralysing bond.

Anyway, how the devil should I protect myself against him? I can't wear armour all day and have every meal analysed before I eat it!

How Janet would have revelled in this situation, with her Wee Free sense of sin and retribution! Cast thy haggis upon the waters, etc. No, I should not be mocking at poor Janet—after all, I'm half Scottish myself. And she did her best; brought me all that money and gave me children and made an excellent housekeeper.

Let me face it, there's an ineradicable streak of cheapness in me. Men at the point of death shouldn't indulge their levity.

I wonder what they'll do with the money when I'm dead. James will save it, Harold squander it; Becky will marry

that worthless little buffoon: and Graham?—how would he use it? They should each get £30,000 after death-duties are paid, and that's not counting my life assurance policies—another £8,000 to split up between them. Unless . . .

Good God, yes, that's it! Forestall him. If I died before he could kill me—why didn't that occur to me?—it would solve the whole problem. Justice would be done without making him a murderer. The high old Roman way out of trouble. Fall on one's sword—only I haven't got a sword, and if I had I'm so light I should probably bounce off the point. Petronius then. The hedonist's method. Euthanasia. Yes, that's the answer.

But don't think of it in terms of expiation. It is simply to save him—I mean, to pacify her shade. Expiation is a meaningless concept, socially, however necessary it may be for the individual's peace of mind. . . .

CHAPTER II

Dinner at the Doctor's

NIGEL STRANGEWAYS AND Clare were strolling down the hill past the park. It was foggy, this February night, and the six o'clock news had promised worse fog to come. From the Thames a hoarse bellowing broke out, and like the pandemonium in a jungle when one great animal roars, it was followed by a series of hoots, yelps, bronchitic snorts and breathy howls as the river traffic crept cautiously through the mirk. If the fog got worse, the traffic would seize up altogether.

It was only two months since Nigel and Clare had moved to Greenwich; but these river noises, which even on a clear night seemed to come from no particular direction but to sound stereophonically all round one's house, were already familiar to them—an intermittent background music to their works and days.

"I love this place," said Clare, slipping her hand into Nigel's overcoat pocket. "I can work here."

They had rented two floors of a Queen Anne house overlooking the park. The ground floor, for all its age, was solid enough to support the masses of stone which Clare worked on. They had turned the double drawing-room into a studio, and acquired a daily to do the cleaning. This admirable woman, Em, a lighterman's wife of proportions almost as titanic as the over-life-size nude which Clare was sculpting, had reeled back when she first saw it, exclaiming, "God! What's that thing?"

"A female nude."

Em eyed it as if it were some convulsion of nature. “Fair gives you the creeps, don’t it?” she said. “See its bloody double, I did once, when our Stan took me to one of them H films.”

But after this shaky start, though Em would never take a duster to any of the figures in the studio, she and Clare got on famously, gossiping away like mad while the chips flew and the cups of char flowed down Em’s enormous gullet.

Through Em, they were already well briefed about the Loudrons, with whom they were dining to-night. Dr. Piers Loudron had been in practice here for nearly forty years: “A lovely man, a real gent, don’t stand no nonsense though, saved our Stan when we all thought he was going to croak”—these were some of the tributes paid by Em, whose view of the medical profession ranged otherwise from the sardonic to the blistering. Dr. Piers’s eldest son, Dr. James Loudron, who was in practice with him, she dismissed as a poor substitute for his dad: he took all day to make up his mind whether you’d got sunburn or leprosy; he had newfangled notions; he failed to hand out those “bottles of the pink” which were Dr. Piers’s panacea for wind; he was a stickler for etiquette and printed forms—“wouldn’t cut you up without he had a dotted line to cut along.” James’s younger brother, Harold, was something in the City and lived in a house on the river bank with his wife, Sharon, as to whom Em said she couldn’t half tell you some dirt if you pressed her—and told you a good deal without pressure. Dr. Piers’s own household was made up by an adopted son, Graham, and a daughter, Rebecca, who now housekept for him, his wife having died some twenty years ago. Rebecca, according to Em, “favoured her Mum, poor soul.” As to Graham, Em gave the impression that he was a dark horse and a bit of a lad, and that Dr. Piers had a special soft spot for him.

The amber street-lighting, which turned Clare’s magnolia-white skin to an implausible mauve, filtered

through the fog to show the façade of an early-Georgian house, one of two pairs, at the corner of Grooms Hill and Burney Street. The woodwork outside was painted white. So, they found when they went in, was the panelling of the hall, the stairs, and the first-floor drawing-room to which Rebecca Loudron led them.

"My goodness, what a lovely room!" exclaimed Clare, her eyes roving over the yellow fitted carpet, the glowing little landscapes set within the white panels, the richly-patterned curtains with their design of yellow flowers and grey feathers in swags on a white background, the button-back chairs, yellow, green, dove-grey, and a single tomato-coloured one echoing the red in a picture on the far wall.

"And what exquisite proportions! It's almost a perfect cube, isn't it?"

"What? Oh, is it? I'm afraid I don't know much about architecture. I'm glad you like it." Rebecca Loudron was clearly not at ease with strangers. Her sentences came blurting out, as though she had not breath enough for more than a few words at a time, and her sallow face flushed darker. She'd be quite handsome, thought Nigel, if she took herself in hand: but what possessed her, with that complexion, to wear a coffee-coloured dress?

"Well, I do congratulate you on this room," he said.

"Oh, it's Father really. He's the one with taste. He's very fastidious—you know, about colours and things, I mean."

"Unusual in a doctor, that, isn't it?" said Clare, appearing not to notice the overtones in Miss Loudron's last remarks.

"I suppose so. But it needs money, and time too." Rebecca lapsed back into the artificial hostessy manner of a small girl entertaining her dolls to a tea-party. "My brothers will be down soon. The fog seems to be getting worse—James must have been delayed on his rounds. How do you like living in Greenwich, Mrs. Strangeways?"

“Very much. But I’m not Mrs. Strangeways, you know. Clare Massinger,” said Clare, smiling pleasantly.

“Oh. But I thought—I mean——” Rebecca flushed and floundered. Nigel came to her rescue.

“No. We live together. But Clare is tremendously old-fashioned. She believes that marriage is for the procreation of children and the raising of families. And her life-work is making her children out of stone and wood. She simply couldn’t divide her attention between them and real ones. So we’ve never married. But it’s all very respectable.”

“Oh, I do admire that!” exclaimed Rebecca, unexpectedly.

“What do you admire, Becky dear?” came a voice from the door.

“Mr. Strangeways was telling me about Miss Massinger’s sculpture. Miss Massinger, let me introduce my brother James.”

Dr. James Loudron was a bulky, awkward, sallow-faced man of about thirty, with a distinct resemblance to his sister. His eyes had a guarded look, which might mean discretion or secretiveness, and made the heartiness of his manner seem superficial.

“Well, you might have given them a drink,” he said.

“I was waiting for you.”

James Loudron dispensed drinks, with the air of pouring them from a graduated measure. While he was thus engaged, his sister murmured aside to Clare:

“I wouldn’t mention—what we were talking about. James is rather conventional, you know.”

James came over from the piano, on which the drink tray rested. When he had given them their glasses, he stooped down, washing his hands at the fire.

“Devilish cold to-night. And the fog’s going to get worse. Hope Mrs. Hyams doesn’t start.”

“You doctors,” remarked Clare in her high, light voice, “do live restless lives. Always leaping up from the table to

rush out and deliver another baby."

"We're used to that," said Rebecca. "Meals in this house are movable feasts."

James was looking at Clare as if he had not properly seen her before. "You know Mrs. Hyams?."

"No. I was just making a deduction."

"I see," he solemnly replied. "Quite. She is expecting to be confined any day now. Have you any children, Miss—er—Mrs.——?"

"Only stone and wood ones," Rebecca put in, with a skittishness Nigel found slightly embarrassing.

"Stone and wood babies?" asked James, baffled.

A voice from behind them said, "She carves them, brother James. She's a sculptor. She sculpts. Or should it be sculptress?"

"Sculptor," said Clare. "How do you do?"

"I'm honoured to meet you. I'm Graham Loudron."

The young man who came forward, after delivering these remarks with a perfectly expressionless face, was of medium height, lean and whippy—about twenty years old, Nigel judged, though it was difficult to tell with a face in which experience and immaturity were so patently blended: the cosmopolitan sort of face one might expect to see above a white sharkskin dinner-jacket in some smarty night-club.

Taking a drink, Graham perched himself easily on the arm of Rebecca's chair. "Hello, ducky. How's the dinner going? My sister is a first-class cook. That's because she's so greedy."

"I'm *not!*" cried Rebecca, highly delighted. "Anyway, it'll spoil if Papa doesn't come soon. Where is he?"

"Waiting to make an entrance," replied Graham, his face still expressionless, which left it open whether the remark had been malicious or just teasing.

"I don't find that awfully amusing, in front of strangers—visitors," James said gruffly.

“Amusing? Of course not: it’s merely true. And I like people who have a sense of occasion. Pop makes his exits and his entrances as if the spotlights were on him. What’s wrong with the grand manner?”

James Loudron grunted, shaking his large head in a baffled, angry way, like a bull baited. It was another zoological simile, however, that vaguely stirred at the back of Nigel’s mind, as he studied Graham. Glancing at Clare, he saw that—in the telepathic way by which their minds occasionally communicated—she was with him. Her lips silently formed the words, “fruit bat.” Yes, that was what Graham reminded him of: triangular face, broad low forehead, sloping down to narrow chin: ears a little pointed: small, fleshy, pouted mouth. But did fruit bats have long noses? Graham’s was long, and its tip seemed likely at any moment to quiver with an animal sort of curiosity. An inquisitive nose.

What he had said about making an entrance was abundantly justified in a few minutes. The door opened, and Dr. Piers Loudron stood inside it for a moment before advancing to greet his guests. Clare was instantly reminded of B.B.—the great Bernard Berenson with whom she had often stayed at Settignano: it was not only the pause at the door, and the ceremonious touch of being last to arrive, like an ambassador at a private party: the small, frail, spruce, upright figure: the neat, white beard; the hands loosely clasped in front of the black velvet jacket; the general air of urbane autocracy and an almost *petit-maître* elegance—all these brought back to Clare her beloved though exigent B.B.

Dr. Piers came forward and took both her hands, gazing at her for a moment, his old eyes blue as lapis lazuli.

“My dear, this is a very great pleasure to me. The genius I have long recognised; but I had not known that such beauty went with it.”

Nigel overheard Graham mutter to Rebecca: “Giving her the full treatment, what?” He had been aware, at Dr. Piers Loudron’s entrance, of a sudden tension in the room—a tension he presumed at the time to come from the other Loudrons’ unconscious screwing of themselves up to resist the strong personality of their father.

After an exchange of compliments with Clare, their host turned to Nigel. “And your name is not unfamiliar to me either. Welcome to my house. I am delighted that we are to be neighbours. You must forgive me, you and Miss Massinger, for not being here to receive you. *You* will understand what kept me, Strangeways, when I tell you that I was writing and quite lost my sense of time.”

“*Writing*, Papa?” Rebecca almost squeaked. “What ever do you mean?”

“I should have thought the expression was not unintelligible.” Sheathing his claws again, the old man turned to his guests. “I have begun to keep a diary. A personal diary. I have never done so since I was a child; and now I’m in my second childhood, the wheel has come full circle.” He gave Clare a wickedly enchanting smile. “I shall have a lot to write in it to-morrow. My first meeting with the great Clare Massinger. The table-talk of that distinguished expert, Nigel Strangeways.”

“Oh? What’s he an expert in, Papa?” Rebecca blurted.

Her father said, in a velvety tone, “All in good time, Becky. What is table-talk without a table? You know, if I die of starvation to-night, I shall not be able to keep up my diary.”

Rebecca Loudron glared at him sulkily. “It only needs dishing up. But I can take a hint.” She went out, breathing hard.

The awkward silence was broken by James. “But *why* have you started keeping a diary, Father? I don’t see the point.”

“My dear boy, at my age, and when one’s tenure of life is unlikely to be long protracted, one feels the need, not exactly—” he gestured with a delicate white hand—“not exactly for confession, but for the drawing-up of a balance sheet.”

“Nonsense, Father,” James broke in; “you’re good for another twenty years. Well, ten years at least.”

“Thank you, dear boy, for your prognosis. It is meant well, I am sure. But prognosis was never your strongest point.”

James Loudron’s childishly disgruntled expression made him look more than ever like his sister. The old man, thought Nigel, must be Jewish: the cutting, snubbing manner, the opulent verbiage, the autocratic air of one who is beyond challenge the head of his tribe: he’s an old show-off too: but excellent company—if you’re not a member of his family.

“Yes,” Dr. Piers was saying to Clare, “my diary is giving me quite a new interest in life. It may even prolong it. Who knows?”

“I shouldn’t bank on that,” remarked Graham Loudron, in an unexpectedly controversial tone.

“Oh, I’m not *banking* on it, Graham. But why do *you* say ——?”

A scream from below stairs, which startled Clare, proved to be Rebecca Loudron announcing dinner.

“Why on earth can’t we have a gong?” asked James.

“Gongs,” his father answered, “are for butlers or suburban householders.”

“Isn’t S.E. 10 suburban enough for a gong?” murmured Graham.

“The clamorous harbinger of victuals,” quoted Dr. Piers. “Will you come, Miss Massinger?”

The dining-room would certainly not have disgraced a butler, its round rosewood table set with Georgian silver, the panelled walls painted the colour of eucalyptus leaf: on

the wall behind Dr. Piers hung an oil of a severe-looking raw-boned lady, evidently the mother of James and Rebecca —Nigel caught James glancing at it with an expression which gave life to his heavy face, while Graham went into the adjoining kitchen to help Rebecca with the dishes.

She was certainly a first-class cook. After the *œuf mimosa*, they ate a delicious *coq au vin*. Dr. Piers, in a manner which suggested that he normally left such duties to others but was doing it as a mark of special favour for her, had poured Clare a glass of wine, then resigned the decanter to James.

"*Bonnes Mares*, isn't it?" said Clare. "My favourite Burgundy. Aren't we in luck to-night?"

"So, Miss Massinger?—you're quite right. But what *expertise*!"

Rebecca, coming in from the kitchen with her own plate, and having only caught the tail-end of these exchanges, said:

"Now you must tell us, Mr. Strangeways, *what* you're an expert at. I'm sure I ought to know, but——"

He's an expert," announced their host, "in criminology."

"You mean he writes books about murders?"

"No. He catches murderers," Dr. Piers said, with a flatness of statement far removed from his normal style.

There was a second or two of absolute silence. Then Rebecca, staring at Nigel in consternation or incredulity, came out with "You *catch?*—Are you at Scotland Yard?"

"No. But I have friends there."

"You mean, you're a sort of private detective?" asked James.

"Sort of."

"But isn't this exciting!" Rebecca gasped. "Do tell us how you work."

Nigel had opened his mouth to reply, when he perceived that Clare, affected perhaps by the tension in this household of which he himself had been intermittently

aware, was about to have one of her occasional fits of going too far.

“It’s really quite simple,” she began, her tone crystal clear and twinkling like the drops on a chandelier. “One of Nigel’s uncles was an assistant-commissioner at Scotland Yard—he got Nigel to help unofficially over one or two cases. That’s how it started—that, and Nigel’s passion for poking his nose into other people’s affairs, particularly the unsavoury ones. No one can compete with the C.I.D. at collecting and sifting evidence: their machine is about as good as any could be for dealing with the ordinary gamut of crime. But now and then something turns up which needs inside knowledge—some non-professional crime, so to speak. Then Nigel insinuates himself into the confidence of the suspects—they’ve often no notion what a viper they’ve taken into their bosom until it’s too late. He worms his way along, deeper and deeper through the secret passages of people’s lives——”

“Your simile is quite revolting,” said Nigel.

“Talking of secret passages,” Rebecca put in hurriedly, “did you know there are supposed to be a lot in Greenwich, under the park?”

James said, “Yes, when Harold and I were kids, we spent hours down in the cellars here, tapping the walls to see if we could find the entrance to one of the passages. We never did, though.”

“Reverting to the Strangeways method,” said Clare, “ it has to be mentioned that he does rather attract crime: things tend to happen in his vicinity. I suppose it’s quite natural, when—good God, what’s that?”

A harsh, strangulated howl tore the air.

“Adiposity,” said James.

“Acidity, I think,” said Rebecca, giggling;

“I beg your pardon?”

“There’s a line of coastal ships that come into Deptford Creek,” James explained. “They all have those peculiar

sirens, and names ending in *ity*. One is called *Argosity*, for instance."

"And another *Aridity*. Fancy a ship being called *Aridity!*"

"That's because it carries sand, no doubt—to the cement works."

"James used to invent absurd names for them, to amuse me when I was little," Rebecca added.

"And they still amuse you, it seems," said Dr. Piers Loudron.

His daughter's heavy face, which had been animated for a few moments, looked quenched again. There was an uncomfortable silence. Graham Loudron switched his curiously intent gaze from Clare to Nigel.

"But *why* do, you do it?" he asked.

"Criminal investigation, you mean?"

"Yes. Do you have noble ideas about justice and retribution and all that? Do you see yourself as a hound of heaven tracking down the wrongdoer?"

"No," Nigel equably replied. "It's chiefly that I'm curious about people—particularly the pathological states of mind."

"You think you can really understand them, without sharing them—those states of mind?"

"Up to a point. Also, it's just as well that murderers shouldn't be allowed to indulge in their pastime. Or don't you agree?" Nigel added, seeing that Graham was determined to be controversial.

"So you are, in fact, high-minded about it," said the young man, the sneer in his tone contrasting oddly with the serious, almost deferential expression on his face. "I can't understand why you don't leave this sort of dirty work to the police. They are at least paid for it."

"Oh, so am I. I charge high fees."

"So you should"—Graham was openly malicious now—"I agree with Shaw that men who clean out sewers should get the highest wages in the country."

“So do I,” remarked Clare. “And what are you doing, Mr. Loudron, to implement this excellent principle?”

“My brother preaches. He leaves practice to the lower grades of humanity,” said James, who had taken a second helping of each course.

“I think the fog is getting into our brains,” said Dr. Piers mildly. Nigel had noticed him glancing vivaciously at the disputants during these exchanges: the old man seemed indulgent towards his adopted son—to be tacitly encouraging Graham, almost, in his provocative remarks—with a favouritism that must have been galling to James and Rebecca. “Wouldn’t you say, Miss Massinger, that natural talent and acquired skills should be rewarded more highly than the sort of mechanical labour which any moron can perform?”

“Cooking, for instance,” interrupted Graham Loudron. “Look at Becky’s talent and skill. Oughtn’t we to pay her more?”

“Oh, really!” James broke out indignantly. “This conversation is ridiculous.”

“I don’t agree,” said Graham. “I’m being perfectly logical.”

“Well then, *you* have a tremendous talent for doing damn-all—how much ought you to be paid for——?”

“Children, children!” their father said. “You’ll be giving our guests the impression that they are dining in the nursery. Let’s go upstairs now. Harold and his wife are coming in after dinner, so you’ll have an opportunity of meeting the rest of my quarrelsome family, Miss Massinger. Sharon is quite a beauty: good bone: her head might interest you.”

His own, thought Clare, as they sat in the drawing-room, is interesting enough: but in my medium I could never do justice to the most interesting thing about it—the swift, unpredictable alternations of vivacity and melancholy: when he withdraws into himself, it is like the sun going in,

the whole room seems overcast. Of course, he's an old man, frail. These withdrawals are a way he conserves his energy? Well, partly that; but also a way of impressing his personality on us, of dominating the company without expending effort? Because he's a bit of a domestic pasha all right. Unobtrusively Clare studied Dr. Piers's face, steeped just now in melancholy, the square, thin mouth turned down at the corners in an expression of bitter, tragic acceptance. For a moment she seemed to be looking at his death mask.

The next moment, Sharon and Harold Loudron entering, Dr. Piers was all animation again. He fussed over his daughter-in-law, led her to a chair by the fire, introduced her to Clare and Nigel, teased her about a new sable tie she was wearing.

"What did I tell you, Miss Massinger?" he said, with a kind of proprietorial gaiety. "Beautiful bone, eh?" He patted Sharon's cheek.

"You're a very susceptible, flattering old man," she coolly remarked, snatching a cigarette from a box, her hand shaking as she put a match to it. "B'rrh, it's cold outside. I've swallowed about a hundred cubic feet of fog walking here."

"You smoke too much, my dear. And eat too little," said Dr. Piers, giving her a clinical scrutiny.

"I have to keep my figure. Never know when I shan't need it again. Harold's——"

"Now, darling! Please," said her husband quickly. "That can keep."

Harold Loudron is like a shadow of his father, thought Nigel; a silhouette. The same features, but no depth to them. A smallish, spruce, upright figure. Uxorious, too—hovering over that red-headed young harpy as if she were a prize orchid. Not that, in her febrile way, she isn't highly attractive. He could still feel the hot, hard, rubbery texture of her small hand when they were introduced: it felt like an

animal’s paw; and there was a glitter in her green eyes—the eyes which now, glancing to and fro over the others as she talked, noticeably missed out those of Graham Loudron, though his were fastened upon her.

Presently, getting into conversation with Harold, Nigel found to his surprise that this rather colourless young business-man had another ruling passion beside his wife. He was a river enthusiast. He and Sharon lived in one of several houses which his mother had bought before the war. It was right on the river wall, beyond the Greenwich power station. “At high tide, I could dive straight into eight feet of water out of our dining-room window. Only I’d be certain to get typhoid, Papa says—the Thames is absolutely foul, you know, in this reach.”

The house had been badly shaken by bombing, but they had reconditioned it; and Harold had even bought an old sprit-sail barge, which he moored at a wharf adjoining the house.

“But you can’t sail her single-handed, surely?” said Nigel.

“No. Afraid not. She’s on the mud now.” Harold’s face, suddenly overcast with melancholy, took on a still closer resemblance to his father’s, “I used to get friends down. And Sharon was keen at first. But . . . I’ve got a launch now: Rather a beauty——“he came out with a flood of technical detail. “But it’s not the same as sail.”

“Couldn’t you have a sailing dinghy, or a little yawl—something like that?”

“Current’s too strong. We get a four-knot tide round the Isle of Dogs, you know. Fierce. You need a strong wind to move against it.”

He went on to talk interestingly about the history of the river. But Nigel felt that it was all rather mechanical: half Harold’s mind seemed to be elsewhere, and his eyes kept restlessly glancing off to where his father was deep in

conversation with Clare and Sharon. It was as if Harold were doing calculations in his head while he talked.

Rising, Sharon walked gracefully over. “General post,” she said to her husband. “Jehovah commands. You go and exercise your charms on Miss Massinger. Not,” she added after Harold had obediently moved across, “not that the poor sweet can compete with his aged parent. Piers is a real killer, you know: twenty years ago none of us would have been safe from him.”

Sharon had lowered her voice to a husky murmur. Disposing herself on the sofa beside Nigel, she contrived to give a strong impression that she was getting into bed with him. Her green eyes, gazing into his, had a moony, swimming look. “I’ve been hearing all about you from Piers. Tell me, how many secret passages have you found to-night?”

Damn and blast Clare, thought Nigel. He said, “Give me time. I’ve only been here a couple of hours.”

“You wait. We’re honeycombed with them.”

“Like a Compton-Burnett family?”

“Probably. But a book is a thing I never read. Well then, tell me, who is the most interesting person in this room?”

“Interesting how?”

“Interesting to you as a student of crime.”

Nigel had a disconcerting habit of taking such gambits more seriously than they were offered. “Well,” he said briskly, allowing his pale blue eyes to rest upon the girl’s, “there’s you. I’d say you would do almost anything for a kick.”

“Almost?” Her green eyes swooned over him.

“What are you trying just now? Larceny? Blackmail? Drugs? Piracy? Murder?”

At one of these words, Sharon’s eyes flickered as if the current had been momentarily cut off. “Well, I *must* say! I’m not sure you’re very nice after all.”

“But of course if you ask me which of the present company is potentially the most delinquent, I’d——”

Nigel’s revelations were cut short by a loud tattoo on the front-door knocker.

“Oh hell!” exclaimed James Loudron. “A call, I suppose.”

“It may be Walter. He said he might drop in.” Rebecca glanced defiantly at her father as she hurried to the door. His elegant white hand set down the coffee cup trembling.

“That mountebank!” he exclaimed. “So now he’s started inviting *himself* to my house.” But Rebecca was already out of the room.

“Another skeleton for you,” whispered Sharon to Nigel. “But he won’t stay in the cupboard. Becky’s sweet on him. It’s her maternal instinct. He’s Pop’s uttermost *bête noire*. Walt Barn. He paints.”

“Mountebank” seemed an all too apt description of the young man who now entered, with the air of one who at any moment might do a double backward somersault. He was little more than five feet high: his extremely broad and powerful-looking shoulders were surmounted by a small, quite round head, a fringe of hair low over the forehead. He had a snub nose, and blue eyes which danced with intelligence or mischief, yet looked incorruptibly innocent. Whether or no he knew there would be a dinner party on to-night, he had made no concessions to Greenwich high-life: he wore a thick, scarlet fisherman’s sweater and paint-stained blue corduroys.

After offering his hand to Dr. Piers, who ignored it, he drew up all his sixty inches in front of the fire-place and surveyed the company.

“Ha!” he cried. “All the beauty and some of the brains of Greenwich assembled. Sharon”—he bobbed at her—“our well-known ex-yachtswoman and ex-commodore of the flouncing flotilla of ex-models. Hiya, James, you earnest old quack! Hysterectomies coming along nicely? And Harold—big-deal Harold, the terror of Mincepudding Lane. And who