RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Collected Stories

Ruth Rendell

Contents

About the Book
About the Author
Also by Ruth Rendell
Title Page
Dedication
Acknowledgement

The Fallen Curtain

- The Fallen Curtain
- People Don’t Do Such Things
- A Bad Heart
- You Can’t Be Too Careful
- The Double
- The Venus Fly Trap
- The Clinging Woman
- The Vinegar Mother
- The Fall of a Coin
- Almost Human
- Divided We Stand

Means of Evil

- Means of Evil
- Old Wives’ Tales
- Ginger and the Kingsmarkham Chalk Circle
- Achilles Heel
- When the Wedding Was Over

The Fever Tree

- The Fever Tree
- The Dreadful Day of Judgement
- A Glowing Future
- An Outside Interest
- A Case of Coincidence
- Thornapple
- May and June
- A Needle for the Devil
- Front Seat
- Paintbox Place
- The Wrong Category

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About the Book

Three classic Ruth Rendell stories: *Means of Evil*, *The Fallen Curtain* and *The Fever Tree*.

Ruth Rendell is unequalled in her ability to weave stories that challenge our preconceptions and prejudices. From Wexford and Burden's investigation of a wife's apparent suicide, with all the evidence pointing to the husband in *Means of Evil* to the unsettling psychology behind a man's friendship with a boy in *The Fallen Curtain* and the paranoia that plagues two people out of love, terrified of being rejected in *The Fever Tree*.

About the Author

Since her first novel, *From Doon with Death*, published in 1964, Ruth Rendell has won many awards, including the Crime Writer's Association Gold Dagger for 1976's best crime novel with *A Demon In My View*, and the Arts Council National Book Award, genre fiction, for *The Lake of Darkness* in 1980.

In 1985 Ruth Rendell received the Silver Dagger for *The Tree of Hands*, and in 1987, writing as Barbara Vine, won her third Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America for *A Dark-Adapted Eye.*

She won the Gold Dagger for *Live Flesh* in 1986, for *King Solomon's Carpet* in 1991 and, as Barbara Vine, a Gold Dagger in 1987 for *A Fatal Inversion.*

Ruth Rendell won the *Sunday Times* Literary Award in 1990, and in 1991 she was awarded the Crime Writer's Association Cartier Diamond Dagger for outstanding contributions to the genre. In 1996 she was awarded the CBE, and in 1997 was made a Life Peer.

Her books have been translated into twenty-five languages and are also published to great acclaim in the United States.

Ruth Rendell has a son and two grandsons, and lives in London

ALSO BY RUTH RENDELL

OMNIBUSES

COLLECTED SHORT STORIES
WEXFORD: AN OMNIBUS
THE SECOND WEXFORD OMNIBUS
THE THIRD WEXFORD OMNIBUS
THE FOURTH WEXFORD OMNIBUS
THE FIFTH WEXFORD OMNIBUS
THREE CASES FOR CHIEF INSPECTOR WEXFORD
THE RUTH RENDELL OMNIBUS
THE SECOND RUTH RENDELL OMNIBUS
THE THIRD RUTH RENDELL OMNIBUS

CHIEF INSPECTOR WEXFORD NOVELS

FROM DOOM WITH DEATH
A NEW LEASE OF DEATH
WOLF TO THE SLAUGHTER
THE BEST MAN TO DIE
A GUILTY THING SURPRISED
NO MORE DYING THEN
MURDER BEING ONCE DONE
SOME LIE AND SOME DIE
SHAKE HANDS FOR EVER
A SLEEPING LIFE
PUT ON BY CUNNING
THE SPEAKER OF MANDARIN
AN UNKINDNESS OF RAVENS
THE VEILED ONE
KISSING THE GUNNER’S DAUGHTER
SIMISOLA
ROAD RAGE
HARM DONE
THE BABES IN THE WOOD
END IN TEARS

NOT IN THE FLESH
THE MONSTER IN THE BOX

SHORT STORIES

THE FALLEN CURTAIN
MEANS OF EVIL
THE FEVER TREE
THE NEW GIRL FRIEND
THE COPPER PEACOCK
BLOOD LINES
PIRANHA TO SCURFY

NOVELLAS

HEARTSTONES
THE THIEF

NON-FICTION

RUTH RENDELL'S SUFFOLK
RUTH RENDELL'S ANTHOLOGY OF THE MURDEROUS MIND

NOVELS

TO FEAR A PAINTED DEVIL
VANITY DIES HARD
THE SECRET HOUSE OF DEATH
ONE ACROSS, TWO DOWN
THE FACE OF TRESPASS
A DEMON IN MY VIEW
A JUDGEMENT IN STONE
MAKE DEATH LOVE ME
THE LAKE OF DARKNESS
MASTER OF THE MOOR
THE KILLING DOLL
THE TREE OF HANDS
LIVE FLESH
TALKING TO STRANGE MEN
THE BRIDESMAID

GOING WRONG
THE CROCODILE BIRD
THE KEYS TO THE STREET
A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES
ADAM AND EVE AND PINCH ME
THE ROTTWEILER
THIRTEEN STEPS DOWN
THE WATER’S LOVELY
PORTOBELLO

Collected Stories

Ruth Rendell

HUTCHINSON
LONDON

For John Foster White

Acknowledgement

All these stories – with the exception of *People Don't Do Such Things, The Vinegar Mother* and *Divided We Stand* – were first published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

The Fallen Curtain

The Fallen Curtain

THE INCIDENT HAPPENED in the spring after his sixth birthday. His mother always referred to it as ‘that dreadful evening’, and always is no exaggeration. She talked about it a lot, especially when he did well at anything, which was often as he was good at school and at passing exams.

Showing her friends his swimming certificate or the prize he won for being top at geography: ‘When I think we might have lost Richard that dreadful evening! You have to believe there’s Someone watching over us, don’t you?’ Clasping him in her arms: ‘He might have been killed – or worse.’ (A remarkable statement, this one.) ‘It doesn’t bear thinking about.’

Apparently, it bore talking about. ‘If I’d told him once, I’d told him fifty times never to talk to strangers or get into cars. But boys will be boys, and he forgot all that when the time came. He was given sweets, of course, and *lured* into this car.’ Whispers at this point, meaning glances in his direction. ‘Threats and suggestions – persuaded into goodness knows what – I’ll never know how we got him back alive.’

What Richard couldn’t understand was how his mother knew so much about it. She hadn’t been there. Only he and the Man had been there, and he couldn’t remember a thing about it. A curtain had fallen over that bit of his memory that held the details of that dreadful evening. He remembered only what had come immediately before it and immediately after.

They were living then in the South London suburb of Upfield, in a little terraced house in Petunia Street, he and

his mother and his father. His mother had been over forty when he was born and he had no brothers or sisters. (‘That’s why we love you so much, Richard.’) He wasn’t allowed to play in the street with the other kids. (‘You want to keep yourself to yourself, dear.’) Round the corner in Lupin Street lived his gran, his father’s mother. Gran never came to their house, though he thought his father would have liked it if she had.

‘I wish you’d have my mother to tea on Sunday,’ he once heard his father say.

‘If that woman sets foot in this house, Stan, I go out of it.’

So gran never came to tea.

‘I hope I know what’s right, Stan, and I know better than to keep the boy away from his grandmother. You can have him round there once a week with you, so long as I don’t have to come in contact with her.’

That made three houses Richard was allowed into, his own, his gran’s, and the house next door in Petunia Street where the Wilsons lived with their Brenda and their John. Sometimes he played in their garden with John, though it wasn’t much fun as Brenda, who was much older, nearly sixteen, was always bullying them and stopping them getting dirty. He and John were in the same class at school, but his mother wouldn’t let him go to school alone with John, although it was only three streets away. She was very careful and nervous about him, was his mother, waiting outside the gates before school ended to walk him home with his hand tightly clasped in hers.

But once a week he didn’t go straight home. He looked forward to Wednesdays because Wednesday evening was the one he spent at gran’s, and because the time between his mother’s leaving him and his arrival at gran’s house was the only time he was ever free and by himself.

This was the way it was. His mother would meet him from school and they’d walk down Plumtree Grove to where Petunia Street started. Lupin Street turned off the Grove a

bit further down, so his mother would see him across the road, waving and smiling encouragingly, till she'd seen him turn the corner into Lupin Street. Gran's house was about a hundred yards down. That hundred yards was his free time, his alone time.

'Mind you run all the way,' his mother called after him.

But at the corner he always stopped running and began to dawdle, stopping to play with the cat that roamed about the bit of waste ground, or climbing on the pile of bricks the builders never came to build into anything. Sometimes, if she wasn't too bad with her arthritis, gran would be waiting for him at her gate, and he didn't mind having to forgo the cat and the climbing because it was so nice in gran's house. Gran had a big TV set – unusually big for those days – and he'd watch it, eating chocolate, until his father knocked off at the factory and turned up for tea. Tea was lovely, fish and chips that gran didn't fetch from the shop but cooked herself, cream meringues and chocolate eclairs, tinned peaches with evaporated milk, the lot washed down with fizzy lemonade. ('It's a disgrace the way your mother spoils that boy, Stan.') They were supposed to be home by seven, but every week when it got round to seven, gran would remember there was a cowboy film coming up on TV and there'd be cocoa and biscuits and potato crisps to go with it. They'd be lucky to be home in Petunia Street before nine.

'Don't blame me,' said his mother, 'if his school work suffers next day.'

That dreadful evening his mother left him as usual at the corner and saw him across the road. He could remember that, and remember too how he'd looked to see if gran was at her gate. When he'd made sure she wasn't, he'd wandered on to the building site to cajole the cat out of the nest she'd made for herself among the rubble. It was late March, a fine afternoon and still broad daylight at four. He was stroking the cat, thinking how thin and bony she was and how some of gran's fish and chips would do her good,

when – what? What next? At this point the curtain came down. Three hours later it lifted, and he was in Plumtree Grove, walking along quite calmly (‘Running in terror with that Man after him’), when whom should he meet but Mrs Wilson’s Brenda out for the evening with her boy friend. Brenda had pointed at him, stared and shouted. She ran up to him and clutched him and squeezed him till he could hardly breathe. Was that what had frightened him into losing his memory? They said no. They said he’d been frightened before – (‘Terrified out of his life’) – and that Brenda’s grabbing him and the dreadful shriek his mother gave when she saw him had nothing to do with it.

Petunia Street was full of police cars and there was a crowd outside their house. Brenda hustled him in, shouting, ‘I’ve found him, I’ve found him!’ and there was his father all white in the face, talking to policemen, his mother half-dead on the sofa being given brandy, and – wonder of wonders – his gran there too. That had been one of the strangest things of that whole strange evening, that his gran had set foot in their house and his mother hadn’t gone out of it.

They all started asking him questions at once. Had he answered them? All that remained in his memory was his mother’s scream. That endured, that shattering sound, and the great open mouth from which it issued as she leapt upon him. Somehow, although he couldn’t have explained why, he connected that scream and her seizing him as if to swallow him up, with the descent of the curtain.

He was never allowed to be alone after that, not even to play with John in the Wilsons’ garden, and he was never allowed to forget those events he couldn’t remember. There was no question of going to gran’s even under supervision, for gran’s arthritis had got so bad they’d put her in the old people’s ward at Upfield Hospital. The Man was never found. A couple of years later a little girl from Plumtree Grove got taken away and murdered. They never found that Man

either, but his mother was sure they were one and the same.

‘And it might have been our Richard. It doesn’t bear thinking of, that Man roaming the streets like a wild beast.’

‘What did he do to me, mum?’ asked Richard, trying.

‘If you don’t remember, so much the better. You want to forget all about it, put it right out of your life.’

If only she’d let him. ‘What did he *do,* dad?’

‘I don’t know, Rich. None of us knows, me nor the police nor your mum, for all she says. Women like to set themselves up as knowing all about things, but it’s my belief you never told her no more than you told us.’

She took him to school and fetched him home until he was twelve. The other kids teased him mercilessly. He wasn’t allowed to go to their houses or have any of them to his. (‘You never know who they know or what sort of connections they’ve got.’) His mother only stopped going everywhere with him when he got taller than she was, and anyone could see he was too big for any Man to attack.

Growing up brought no elucidation of that dreadful evening but it did bring, with adolescence, the knowledge of what might have happened. And as he came to understand that it wasn’t only threats and blows and stories of horror which the Man might have inflicted on him, he felt an alien in his own body or as if that body were covered with a slime which nothing could wash away. For there was no way of knowing now, nothing to do about it but wish his mother would leave the subject alone, avoid getting friendly with people and work hard at school.

He did very well there, for he was naturally intelligent and had no outside diversions. No one was surprised when he got to a good university, not Oxford or Cambridge but nearly as good – (‘Imagine, all that brainpower might have been wasted if that Man had had his way’) – where he began to read for a science degree. He was the first member of his family ever to go to college, and the only cloud in the sky

was that his gran, as his father pointed out, wasn't there to see his glory.

She had died in the hospital when he was fourteen and she'd left her house to his parents. They'd sold it and theirs and bought a much nicer, bigger one with a proper garden and a garage in a suburb some five miles further out from Upfield. The little bit of money she'd saved she left to Richard, to come to him when he was eighteen. It was just enough to buy a car, and when he came down from university for the Easter holidays, he bought a two-year-old Ford and took and passed his driving test.

'That boy,' said his mother, 'passes every exam that comes his way. It's like as if he *couldn't* fail if he tried. But he's got a guardian angel watching over him, has had ever since he was six.' Her husband had admonished her for her too-excellent memory and now she referred only obliquely to that dreadful evening. 'When you-know-what happened and he was spared.'

She watched him drive expertly round the block, her only regret that he hadn't got a nice girl beside him, a sensible, hard-working fiancée – not one of your tarty pieces – saving up for the deposit on a house and good furniture. Richard had never had a girl. There was one at college he liked and who, he thought, might like him. But he didn't ask her out. He was never quite sure whether he was fit for any girl to know, let alone love.

The day after he'd passed his test he thought he'd drive over to Upfield and look up John Wilson. There was more in this, he confessed to himself, than a wish to revive old friendship. John was the only friend he'd really ever had, but he'd always felt inferior to him, for John had been (and had had the chance to be) easy and sociable and had had a girl to go out with when he was only fourteen. He rather liked the idea of arriving outside the Wilsons' house, fresh from his first two terms at university and in his own car.

It was a Wednesday in early April, a fine, mild afternoon and still, of course, broad daylight at four. He chose a Wednesday because that was early closing day in Upfield and John wouldn't be in the hardware shop where he'd worked ever since he left school three years before.

But as he approached Petunia Street up Plumtree Grove from the southerly direction, it struck him that he'd quite like to take a look at his gran's old house and see whether they'd ever built anything on that bit of waste ground. For years and years, half his lifetime, those bricks had lain there, though the thin old cat had disappeared or died long before Richard's parents moved. And the bricks were still there, overgrown now by grass and nettles. He drove into Lupin Street, moving slowly along the pavement edge until he was within sight of his gran's house. There was enough of his mother in him to stop him parking directly outside the house – ('Keep yourself to yourself and don't pry into what doesn't concern you') – so he stopped the car some few yards this side of it.

It had been painted a bright pink, the window woodwork picked out in sky-blue. Richard thought he liked it better the way it used to be, cream plaster and brown wood, but he didn't move away. A strange feeling had come over him, stranger than any he could remember having experienced, which kept him where he was, staring at the wilderness of rubble and brick and weeds. Just nostalgia, he thought, just going back to those Wednesdays which had been the high-spots of his weeks.

It was funny the way he kept looking among the rubble for the old cat to appear. If she were alive, she'd be as old as he by now and not many cats live that long. But he kept on looking just the same, and presently, as he was trying to pull himself out of this dreamy, dazed feeling and go off to John's, a living creature did appear behind the shrub-high weeds. A boy, about eight. Richard didn't intend to get out

of the car. He found himself out of it, locking the door and then strolling over on to the building site.

You couldn't really see much from a car, not details, that must have been why he'd got out, to examine more closely this scene of his childhood pleasures. It seemed very small, not the wild expanse of brick hills and grassy gullies he remembered, but a scrubby little bit of land twenty feet wide and perhaps twice as long. Of course it had seemed bigger because he had been so much smaller, smaller even than this little boy who now sat on a brick mountain, eyeing him.

He didn't mean to speak to the boy, for he wasn't a child any more but a Man. And if there is an explicit rule that a child mustn't speak to strangers, there is an explicit, unstated one, that a Man doesn't speak to children. If he had *meant* to speak, his words would have been very different, something about having played there himself once perhaps, or having lived nearby. The words he did use came to his lips as if they had been placed there by some external (or deeply internal) ruling authority.

'You're trespassing on private land. Did you know that?'

The boy began to ease himself down. 'All the kids play here, mister.'

'Maybe, but that's no excuse. Where do you live?'

In Petunia Street, but I'm going to my gran's . . . No.

'Upfield High Road.'

'I think you'd better get in my car,' the Man said, 'and I'll take you home.'

Doubtfully, the boy said, 'There won't be no one there. My mum works late Wednesdays and I haven't got no dad. I'm to go straight home from school and have my tea and wait for when my mum comes at seven.'

Straight to my gran's and have my tea and . . .

'But you haven't, have you? You hung about trespassing on other people's property.'

'You a cop, mister?'

‘Yes,’ said the Man, ‘yes, I am.’

The boy got into the car quite willingly. ‘Are we going to the cop shop?’

‘We may go to the police station later. I want to have a talk to you first. We’ll go . . .’ Where should they go? South London has many open spaces, commons they’re called. Wandsworth Common, Tooting Common, Streatham Common . . . What made him choose Drywood Common, so far away, a place he’d heard of but hadn’t visited, so far as he knew, in his life? The Man had known, and he was the Man now, wasn’t he? ‘We’ll go to Drywood and have a talk. There’s some chocolate on the dashboard shelf. Have a bit if you like.’ He started the car and they drove off past gran’s old house. ‘Have it all,’ he said.

The boy had it all. He introduced himself as Barry. He was eight and he had no brothers or sisters or father, just his mum who worked to keep them both. His mum had told him never to get into strangers’ cars, but a cop was different, wasn’t it?

‘Quite different,’ said the Man. ‘Different altogether.’

It wasn’t easy finding Drywood Common because the signposting was bad around there. But the strange thing was that, once there, the whole lay-out of the common was familiar to him.

‘We’ll park,’ he said, ‘down by the lake.’

He found the lake with ease, driving along the main road that bisected the common, then turning left on to a smaller lane. There were ducks on the pond. It was surrounded by trees, but in the distance you could see houses and a little row of shops. He parked the car by the water and switched off the engine.

Barry was very calm and trusting. He listened intelligently to the policeman’s lecture on behaving himself and not trespassing, and he didn’t fidget or seem bored when the Man stopped talking about that and began to talk about himself. The Man had had a lonely sort of life, a bit like

being in prison, and he'd never been allowed out alone. Even when he was in his own room doing his homework, he'd been watched – ('Leave your door open, dear. We don't want any secrets in this house') – and he hadn't had a single real friend. Would Barry be his friend, just for a few hours, just for that evening? Barry would.

'But you're grown up now,' he said.

The Man nodded. Barry said later when he recalled the details of what his mother called that nasty experience – for he was always able to remember every detail – that it was at this point the Man had begun to cry.

A small, rather dirty, hand touched the Man's hand and held it. No one had ever held his hand like that before. Not possessively or commandingly – ('Hold on to me tight, Richard, while we cross the road') – but gently, sympathetically – lovingly? Their hands remained clasped, the small one covering the large, then the large enclosing and gripping the small. A tension, as of time stopped, held the two people in the car still. The boy broke it, and time moved again.

'I'm getting a bit hungry,' he said.

'Are you? It's past your teatime. I'll tell you what, we could have some fish and chips. One of those shops over there is a fish and chip shop.'

Barry started to get out of the car.

'No, not you,' the Man said. 'It's better if I go alone. You wait here. OK?'

'OK,' Barry said.

He was only gone ten minutes – for he knew exactly and from a distance which one of the shops it was – and when he got back Barry was waiting for him. The fish and chips were good, almost as good as those gran used to cook. By the time they had finished eating and had wiped their greasy fingers on his handkerchief, dusk had come. Lights were going up in those far-off shops and houses but here, down by the lake, the trees made it quite dark.

‘What’s the time?’ said Barry.

‘A quarter past six.’

‘I ought to be getting back now.’

‘How about a game of hide and seek first? Your mum won’t be home yet. I can get you back to Upfield in ten minutes.’

‘I don’t know . . . Suppose she gets in early?’

‘Please,’ the Man said. ‘*Please,* just for a little while. I used to play hide and seek down here when I was a kid.’

‘But you said you never played anywhere. You said . . .’

‘Did I? Maybe I didn’t. I’m a bit confused.’

Barry looked at him gravely. ‘I’ll hide first,’ he said. He watched Barry disappear among the trees. Grown-ups who play hide and seek don’t keep to the rules, they don’t bother with that counting to a hundred bit. But the Man did. He counted slowly and seriously, and then he got out of the car and began walking round the pond. It took him a long time to find Barry, who was more proficient at this game than he, a proficiency which showed when it was his turn to do the seeking. The darkness was deepening, and there was no one else on the common. He and the boy were quite alone.

Barry had gone to hide. In the car the Man sat counting – ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred. When he stopped he was aware of the silence of the place, alleviated only by the faint, distant hum of traffic on the South Circular Road, just as the darkness was alleviated by the red blush of the sky, radiating the glow of London. Last time round, it hadn’t been this dark. The boy wasn’t behind any of the trees or in the bushes by the waterside or covered by the brambles in the ditch that ran parallel to the road.

Where the hell had the stupid kid got to? His anger was irrational, for he had suggested the game himself. Was he angry because the boy had proved better at it than he? Or was it something deeper and fiercer than that, rage at rejection by this puny and ignorant little savage?

‘Where are you, Barry? Come on out. I’ve had about enough of this.’

There was no answer. The wind rustled, and a tiny twig scuttered down out of a treetop to his feet. God, that little devil! What’ll I do if I can’t find him? What the hell’s he playing at?

When I find him I’ll – I’ll kill him.

He shivered. The blood was throbbing in his head. He broke a stick off a bush and began thrashing about with it, enraged, shouting into the dark silence, ‘Barry Barry, come out! Come out at once, d’you hear me?’ He doesn’t want me, he doesn’t care about me, no one will ever want me . . .

Then he heard a giggle from a treetop above him, and suddenly there was a crackling of twigs, a slithering sound. Not quite above him – over there. In the giggle, he thought, there was a note of jeering. But where, where? Down by the water’s edge. He’d been up in the tree that almost overhung the pond. There was a thud as small feet bounced on to the ground, and again that maddening, gleeful giggle. For a moment the Man stood still. His hands clenched as on a frail neck, and he held them pressed together, crushing out life. Run, Barry, run . . . Run, Richard, to Plumtree Grove and Brenda, to home and mother who knows what dreadful evenings are.

The Man thrust his way through the bushes, making for the pond. The boy would be away by now, but not far away. And his legs were long enough and strong enough to outrun him, his hands strong enough to ensure there would be no future of doubt and fear and curtained memory.

But he was nowhere, nowhere. And yet . . . What was that sound, as of stealthy, fearful feet creeping away? He wheeled round, and there was the boy coming towards him, walking a little timidly between the straight, grey tree trunks *towards* him. A thick constriction gripped his throat. There must have been something in his face, some threatening gravity made more intense by the half-dark that

stopped the boy in his tracks. Run, Barry, run, run fast away . . .

They stared at each other for a moment, for a lifetime, for twelve long years. Then the boy gave a merry laugh, fearless and innocent. He ran forward and flung himself into the Man's arms, and the Man, in a great release of pain and anguish, lifted the boy up, lifted him laughing into his own laughing face. They laughed with a kind of rapture at finding each other at last, and in the dark, under the whispering trees, each held the other close in an embrace of warmth and friendship.

'Come on,' Richard said. 'I'll take you home. I don't know what I was doing, bringing you here in the first place.'

'To play hide and seek,' said Barry. 'We had a nice time.'

They got back into the car. It was after seven when they got to Upfield High Road, but not much after.

'I don't reckon my mum's got in yet.'

'I'll drop you here. I won't go up to your place.' Richard opened the car door to let him out. 'Barry?'

'What is it, Mister?'

'Don't ever take a lift from a Man again, will you? Promise me?'

Barry nodded. 'OK.'

'I once took a lift from a stranger, and for years I couldn't remember what had happened. It sort of came back to me tonight, meeting you. I remember it all now. He was all right, just a bit lonely like me. We had fish and chips on Drywood Common and played hide and seek like you and me, and he brought me back nearly to my house – like I've brought you. But it wouldn't always be like that.'

'How do you know?'

Richard looked at his strong young man's hands. 'I just know,' he said. 'Good-bye, Barry, and – thanks.'

He drove away, turning once to see that the boy was safely in his house. Barry told his mother all about it, but she insisted it must have been a nasty experience and

called the police. Since Barry couldn’t remember the number of the car and had no idea of the stranger’s name, there was little they could do. They never found the Man.

People Don’t Do Such Things

PEOPLE DON’T DO such things.

That’s the last line of *Hedda Gabler,* and Ibsen makes this chap say it out of a sort of bewilderment at finding truth stranger than fiction. I know just how he felt. I say it myself every time I come up against the hard reality that Reeve Baker is serving fifteen years in prison for murdering my wife, and that I played my part in it, and that it happened to us three. People don’t do such things. But they do.

Real life had never been stranger than fiction for me. It had always been beautifully pedestrian and calm and pleasant, and all the people I knew jogged along in the same sort of way. Except Reeve, that is. I suppose I made a friend of Reeve and enjoyed his company so much because of the contrast between his manner of living and my own, and so that when he had gone home I could say comfortably to Gwendolen:

‘How dull our lives must seem to Reeve!’

An acquaintance of mine had given him my name when he had got into a mess with his finances and was having trouble with the Inland Revenue. As an accountant with a good many writers among my clients, I was used to their irresponsible attitude to money – the way they fall back on the excuse of artistic temperament for what is, in fact, calculated tax evasion – and I was able to sort things out for Reeve and show him how to keep more or less solvent. As a way, I suppose of showing his gratitude, Reeve took Gwendolen and me out to dinner, then we had him over at our place, and after that we became close friends.

Writers and the way they work hold a fascination for ordinary chaps like me. It's a mystery to me where they get their ideas from, apart from constructing the thing and creating characters and making their characters talk and so on. But Reeve could do it all right, and set the whole lot at the court of Louis Quinze or in medieval Italy or what not. I've read all nine of his historical novels and admired what you might call his virtuosity. But I only read them to please him really. Detective stories were what I preferred and I seldom bothered with any other form of fiction.

Gwendolen once said to me it was amazing Reeve could fill his books with so much drama when he was living drama all the time. You'd imagine he'd have got rid of it all on paper. I think the truth was that every one of his heroes was himself, only transformed into Cesare Borgia or Casanova. You could see Reeve in them all, tall, handsome and dashing as they were, and each a devil with the women. Reeve had got divorced from his wife a year or so before I'd met him, and since then he'd had a string of girl friends, models, actresses, girls in the fashion trade, secretaries, journalists, schoolteachers, high-powered lady executives and even a dentist. Once when we were over at his place he played us a record of an aria from *Don Giovanni* – another character Reeve identified with and wrote about. It was called the 'Catalogue Song' and it listed all the types of girls the Don had made love to, blonde, brunette, redhead, young, old, rich, poor, ending up with something about as long as she wears a petticoat you know what he does. Funny, I even remember the Italian for that bit, though it's the only Italian I know. *Purche porti la gonnella voi sapete quel che fa.* Then the singer laughed in an unpleasant way, laughed to music with a seducer's sneer, and Reeve laughed too, saying it gave him a fellow-feeling.

I'm old-fashioned, I know that. I'm conventional. Sex is for marriage, as far as I'm concerned, and what sex you have before marriage – I never had much – I can't help thinking of

as a shameful secret thing. I never even believed that people did have much of it outside marriage. All talk and boasting, I thought. I really did think that. And I kidded myself that when Reeve talked of going out with a new girl he meant going out with. Taking out for a meal, I thought, and dancing with and taking home in a taxi and then maybe a good-night kiss on the doorstep. Until one Sunday morning, when Reeve was coming over for lunch, I phoned him to ask if he'd meet us in the pub for a pre-lunch drink. He sounded half-asleep and I could hear a girl giggling in the background. Then I heard him say:

'Get some clothes on, lovey, and make us a cup of tea, will you? My head's splitting.'

I told Gwendolen.

'What did you expect?' she said.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I thought you'd be shocked.'

'He's very good-looking and he's only thirty-seven. It's natural.' But she had blushed a little. 'I am rather shocked,' she said. 'We don't belong in his sort of life, do we?'

And yet we remained in it, on the edge of it. As we got to know Reeve better, he put aside those small prevarications he had employed to save our feelings. And he would tell us, without shyness, anecdotes of his amorous past and present. The one about the girl who was so possessive that even though he had broken with her, she had got into his flat in his absence and been lying naked in his bed when he brought his new girl home that night; the one about the married woman who had hidden him for two hours in her wardrobe until her husband had gone out; the girl who had come to borrow a pound of sugar and had stayed all night; fair girls, dark girls, plump, thin, rich, poor . . . *Purche porti la gonnella voi sapete quel che fa.*

'It's another world,' said Gwendolen.

And I said, 'How the other half lives.'

We were given to clichés of this sort. Our life was a cliché, the commonest sort of life led by middle-class people in the

Western world. We had a nice detached house in one of the right suburbs, solid furniture and lifetime-lasting carpets. I had my car and she hers. I left for the office at half-past eight and returned at six. Gwendolen cleaned the house and went shopping and gave coffee mornings. In the evenings we liked to sit at home and watch television, generally going to bed at eleven. I think I was a good husband. I never forgot my wife's birthday or failed to send her roses on our anniversary or omitted to do my share of the dishwashing. And she was an excellent wife, romantically-inclined, not sensual. At any rate, she was never sensual with me.

She kept every birthday card I ever sent her, and the Valentines I sent her while we were engaged. Gwendolen was one of those women who hoard and cherish small mementoes. In a drawer of her dressing table she kept the menu card from the restaurant where we celebrated our engagement, a picture postcard of the hotel where we spent our honeymoon, every photograph of us that had ever been taken, our wedding pictures in a leather-bound album. Yes, she was an arch-romantic, and in her diffident way, with an air of daring, she would sometimes reproach Reeve for his callousness.

'But you can't do that to someone who loves you,' she said when he had announced his brutal intention of going off on holiday without telling his latest girl friend where he was going or even that he was going at all. 'You'll break her heart.'

'Gwendolen, my love, she hasn't got a heart. Women don't have them. She has another sort of machine, a combination of telescope, lie detector, scalpel and castrating device.'

'You're too cynical,' said my wife. 'You may fall in love yourself one day and then you'll know how it feels.'

'Not necessarily. As Shaw said –' Reeve was always quoting what other writers had said '– "Don't do unto others