

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# A Shilling for Candles

Josephine Tey

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## About the Book

Beneath the sea cliffs of the south coast, suicides are a sad but common fact of life. Yet even the hardened coastguard knows something is wrong when a beautiful film actress is found lying dead on the beach one morning.

Inspector Grant has to take a more professional attitude: death by suicide, however common, has to have a motive – just like murder...

## About the Author

Josephine Tey is one of the best known and best loved of all crime writers. She began to write full-time after the successful publication of her first novel, *The Man in the Queue* (1929), which introduced Inspector Grant of Scotland Yard. In 1937 she returned to crime writing with *A Shilling for Candles*, but it wasn't until after the Second World War that the majority of her crime novels were published. Josephine Tey died in 1952, leaving her entire estate to the National Trust.

*Also by Josephine Tey*

The Man in the Queue

Miss Pym Disposes

The Franchise Affair

Brat Farrar

To Love and Be Wise

The Daughter of Time

The Singing Sands

# A Shilling for Candles

Josephine Tey



arrow books

# 1

IT WAS A little after seven on a summer morning, and William Potticary was taking his accustomed way over the short down grass of the cliff-top. Beyond his elbow, two hundred feet below lay the Channel, very still and shining, like a milky opal. All round about him hung the bright air, empty as yet of larks. In all the sunlit world no sound except for the screaming of some seagulls on the distant beach; no human activity except for the small lonely figure of Potticary himself, square and dark and uncompromising. A million dewdrops sparkling on the virgin grass suggested a world new come from its Creator's hand. Not to Potticary, of course. What the dew suggested to Potticary was that the ground fog of the early hours had not begun to disperse until well after sunrise. His subconscious noted the fact and tucked it away, while his conscious mind debated whether, having raised an appetite for breakfast, he should turn at the Gap and go back to the Coastguard Station, or whether, in view of the fineness of the morning, he should walk into Westover for the morning paper, and so hear about the latest murder two hours earlier than he would otherwise. Of course, what with wireless, the edge was off the morning paper, as you might say. But it was an objective. War or peace, a man had to have an objective. You couldn't go into Westover just to look at the front. And going back to breakfast with the paper under your arm made you feel fine, somehow. Yes, perhaps he would walk into the town.

The pace of his black, square-toed boots quickened slightly, their shining surface winking in the sunlight. Proper service, these boots were. One might have thought that



Potticary, having spent his best years in brushing his boots to order, would have asserted his individuality, or expressed his personality, or otherwise shaken the dust of a meaningless discipline off his feet by leaving the dust on his boots. But no, Potticary, poor fool, brushed his boots for love of it. He probably had a slave mentality; but had never read enough for it to worry him. As for expressing one's personality, if you described the symptoms to him, he would, of course, recognise them. But not by name. In the Service they call that "contrariness".

A sea-gull flashed suddenly above the cliff-top, and dropped screaming from sight to join its wheeling comrades below. A dreadful row these gulls were making. Potticary moved over to the cliff edge to see what jetsam the tide, now beginning to ebb, had left for them to quarrel over.

The white line of the gently creaming surf was broken by a patch of verdigris green. A bit of cloth. Baize, or something. Funny it should stay so bright a colour after being in the water so—

Potticary's blue eyes widened suddenly, his body becoming strangely still. Then the square black boots began to run. Thud, thud, thud, on the thick turf, like a heart beating. The Gap was two hundred yards away, but Potticary's time would not have disgraced a track performer. He clattered down the rough steps hewn in the chalk of the gap, gasping; indignation welling through his excitement. That is what came of going into cold water before breakfast! Lunacy, so help him. Spoiling other people's breakfasts, too. Schaefer's best, except where ribs broken. Not likely to be ribs broken. Perhaps only a faint after all. Assure the patient in a loud voice that he is safe. Her arms and legs were as brown as the sand. That is why he had thought the green thing a piece of cloth. Lunacy, so help him. Who wanted cold water in the dawn unless they had to swim for it. He'd had to swim for it in his time. In that Red Sea port. Taking in a landing party to help the Arabs. Though why anyone wanted

to help the lousy bastards—! That was the time to swim. When you had to. Orange juice and thin toast, too. No stamina. Lunacy, so help him.

It was difficult-going on the beach. The large white pebbles slid maliciously under his feet, and the rare patches of sand, being about tide level, were soft and yielding. But presently he was within the cloud of gulls, enveloped by their beating wings and their wild crying.

There was no need for Schaefer's, nor for any other method. He saw that at a glance. The girl was past all help. And Potticary who had picked bodies unemotionally from the Red Sea surf, was strangely moved. It was all wrong that someone so young should be lying there when all the world was waking up to a brilliant day; when so much of life lay in front of her. A pretty girl too, she must have been. Her hair had a dyed look, but the rest of her was all right.

A wave washed over her feet and sucked itself away, derisively, through the scarlet-tipped toes. Potticary, although the tide in another minute would be yards away, pulled the inanimate heap a little higher up the beach, beyond reach of the sea's impudence.

Then his mind turned to telephones. He looked round for some garment which the girl might have left behind when she went in to swim. But there seemed to be nothing. Perhaps she had left whatever she was wearing below high-water level and the tide had taken it. Or perhaps it wasn't here that she had gone into the water. Anyhow, there was nothing now with which to cover her body, and Potticary turned away and began his hurried plodding along the beach again, and so back to the coastguard station and the nearest telephone.

'Body on the beach,' he said to Bill Gunter as he took the receiver from the hook and called the police.

Bill clicked his tongue against his front teeth, and jerked his head back. A gesture which expressed with eloquence and economy the tiresomeness of circumstances, the

unreasonableness of human beings who get themselves drowned, and his own satisfaction in expecting the worst of life and being right. 'If they want to commit suicide,' he said in his subterranean voice, 'why do they have to pick on us? Isn't there the whole of the south coast?'

'Not a suicide,' Potticary gasped in the intervals of hulloing.

Bill took no notice of him. 'Just because the fare to the south coast is more than to here! You'd think when a fellow was tired of life he'd stop being mean about the fare and bump himself off in style. But no! They take the cheapest ticket they can get and strew themselves over our doorstep!'

'Beachy Head get a lot,' gasped the fair-minded Potticary. 'Not a suicide, anyhow.'

'Course it's a suicide. What do we have cliffs for? Bulwark of England? No. Just as a convenience to suicides. That makes four this year. And there'll be more when they get their income tax demands.'

He paused; his ear caught by what Potticary was saying.

'—a girl. Well, a woman. In a bright green bathing-dress.' (Potticary belonged to a generation which did not know swim-suits.) 'Just south of the Gap. 'Bout a hundred yards. No, no one there. I had to come away to telephone. But I'm going back right away. Yes, I'll meet you there. Oh, hullo, Sergeant, is that you? Yes, not the best beginning of a day, but we're getting used to it. Oh, no, just a bathing fatality. Ambulance? Oh, yes, you can bring it practically to the Gap. The track goes off the main Westover road just past the third milestone, and finishes in those trees just inland from the Gap. All right, I'll be seeing you.'

'How can you tell it's just a bathing fatality?' Bill said.

'She had a bathing-dress on, didn't you hear?'

'Nothing to hinder her putting on a bathing-dress to throw herself into the water. Make it look like accident.'

‘You can’t throw yourself into the water this time of year. You land on the beach. And there isn’t any doubt what you’ve done.’

‘Might have walked into the water till she drowned,’ said Bill, who was a last-ditcher by nature.

‘Might have died of an overdose of bulls-eyes,’ said Potticary, who approved of last-ditchery in Arabia but found it boring to live with.

THEY STOOD ROUND the body in a solemn little group: Potticary, Bill, the sergeant, a constable, and the two ambulance men. The younger ambulance man was worried about his stomach, and the possibility of its disgracing him, but the others had nothing but business in their minds.

‘Know her?’ the sergeant asked.

‘No,’ said Potticary, ‘never seen her before.’

None of them had seen her before.

‘Can’t be from Westover. No one would come out from town with a perfectly good beach at their doors. Must have come from inland somewhere.’

‘Maybe she went into the water at Westover and was washed up here,’ the constable suggested.

‘Not time for that,’ Potticary objected. ‘She hadn’t been that long in the water. Must have been drowned hereabouts.’

‘Then how did she get here?’ the sergeant asked.

‘By car, of course,’ Bill said.

‘And where is the car now?’

‘Where everyone leaves their car: where the track ends at the trees.’

‘Yes?’ said the sergeant. ‘Well, there’s no car there.’

The ambulance men agreed with him. They had come up that way with the police—the ambulance was waiting there now—but there was no sign of any other car.

‘That’s funny,’ Potticary said. ‘There’s nowhere near enough to be inside walking distance. Not at this time in the morning.’

‘Shouldn’t think she’d walk anyhow,’ the elder ambulance man observed. ‘Expensive,’ he added, as they seemed to question him.

They considered the body for a moment in silence. Yes, the ambulance man was right; it was a body expensively cared for.

‘And where are her clothes, anyhow?’ The sergeant was worried.

Potticary explained his theory about the clothes; that she had left them below high-water mark and that they were now somewhere at sea.

‘Yes, that’s possible,’ said the sergeant. ‘But how did she get here?’

‘Funny she should be bathing alone, isn’t it?’ ventured the young ambulance man, trying out his stomach.

‘Nothing’s funny, nowadays,’ Bill rumbled. ‘It’s a wonder she wasn’t playing jumping off the cliff with a glider. Swimming on an empty stomach, all alone, is just too ordinary. The young fools make me tired.’

‘Is that a bracelet round her ankle, or what?’ the constable asked.

Yes, it was a bracelet. A chain of platinum links. Curious links, they were. Each one shaped like a C.

‘Well,’ the sergeant straightened himself, ‘I suppose there’s nothing to be done but to remove the body to the mortuary, and then find out who she is. Judging by appearances that shouldn’t be difficult. Nothing “lost, stolen or strayed” about that one.’

‘No,’ agreed the ambulance man. ‘The butler is probably telephoning the station now in great agitation.’

‘Yes.’ The sergeant was thoughtful. ‘I still wonder how she came here, and what—’

His eyes had lifted to the cliff face, and he paused.

‘So! We have company!’ he said.

They turned to see a man’s figure on the cliff-top at the Gap. He was standing in an attitude of intense eagerness,

watching them. As they turned towards him he did a swift right-about and disappeared.

‘A bit early for strollers,’ the sergeant said. ‘And what’s he running away for? We’d better have a talk with him.’

But before he and the constable had moved more than a pace or two it became evident that the man, far from running away, had been merely making for the entrance to the Gap. His thin dark figure shot now from the mouth of the Gap and came towards them at a shambling run, slipping and stumbling, and giving the little group watching his advent an impression of craziness. They could hear the breath panting through his open mouth as he drew near, although the distance from the Gap was not long and he was young.

He stumbled into their compact circle without looking at them, pushing aside the two policemen who had unconsciously interposed their bulk between him and the body.

‘Oh, yes, it is! Oh, it is, it is!’ he cried, and without warning sat down and burst into loud tears.

Six flabbergasted men watched him in silence for a moment. Then the sergeant patted him kindly on the back and said, idiotically: ‘It’s all right, son!’

But the young man only rocked himself to and fro and wept the more.

‘Come on, come on,’ rallied the constable, coaxing. (Really, a dreadful exhibition on a nice bright morning.) ‘That won’t do anyone any good, you know. Best pull yourself together—sir,’ he added, noting the quality of the handkerchief which the young man had produced.

‘A relation of yours?’ the sergeant inquired, his voice suitably modulated from its former business-like pitch.

The young man shook his head.

‘Oh, just a friend?’

‘She was so good to me, so good!’

‘Well, at least you’ll be able to help us. We were beginning to wonder about her. You can tell us who she is.’

‘She’s my—hostess.’

‘Yes, but I meant, what is her name?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You—don’t—know! Look here, sir, pull yourself together. You’re the only one that can help us. You must know the name of the lady you were staying with.’

‘No, no; I don’t.’

‘What did you call her, then?’

‘Chris.’

‘Chris what?’

‘Just Chris.’

‘And what did she call you?’

‘Robin.’

‘Is that your name?’

‘Yes, my name’s Robert Stannaway. No, Tisdall. It used to be Stannaway,’ he added, catching the sergeant’s eye and feeling apparently that explanation was needed.

What the sergeant’s eye said was ‘God give me patience!’ What his tongue said was: ‘It all sounds a bit strange to me, Mr—er—’

‘Tisdall.’

‘—Tisdall. Can you tell me how the lady got here this morning?’

‘Oh, yes. By car.’

‘By car, eh? Know what became of the car?’

‘Yes. I stole it.’

‘You what?’

‘I stole it. I’ve just brought it back. It was a swinish thing to do. I felt a cad so I came back. When I found she wasn’t anywhere on the road, I thought I’d find her stamping about here. Then I saw you all standing round something—oh, dear, oh dear!’ He began to rock himself again.

‘Where were you staying with this lady?’ asked the sergeant, in exceedingly business-like tones. ‘In Westover?’



‘Oh no. She has—had, I mean—oh dear!—a cottage. Briars, it’s called. Just outside Medley.’

“Bout a mile and a half inland,” supplemented Potticary, as the sergeant, who was not a native, looked a question.

‘Were you alone, or is there a staff there?’

‘There’s just a woman from the village—Mrs Pitts—who comes in and cooks.’

‘I see.’

There was a slight pause.

‘All right, boys.’ The sergeant nodded to the ambulance men, and they bent to their work with the stretcher. The young man drew in his breath sharply and once more covered his face with his hands.

‘To the mortuary, Sergeant?’

‘Yes.’

The man’s hands came away from his face abruptly.

‘Oh, no! Surely not! She had a home. Don’t they take people home?’

‘We can’t take the body of an unknown woman to an uninhabited bungalow.’

‘It isn’t a bungalow,’ the man automatically corrected. ‘No. No, I suppose not. But it seems dreadful—the mortuary. Oh, God in heaven above!’ he burst out, ‘why did this have to happen!’

‘Davis,’ the sergeant said to the constable, ‘you go back with the others and report. I’m going over to—what is it?—Briars? with Mr Tisdall.’

The two ambulance men crunched their heavy way over the pebbles, followed by Potticary and Bill. The noise of their progress had become distant before the sergeant spoke again.

‘I suppose it didn’t occur to you to go swimming with your hostess?’

A spasm of something like embarrassment ran across Tisdall’s face. He hesitated.

‘No. I—not much in my line, I’m afraid: swimming before breakfast. I—I’ve always been a rabbit at games and things like that.’

The sergeant nodded, non-committal. ‘When did she leave for a swim?’

‘I don’t know. She told me last night that she was going to the Gap for a swim if she woke early. I woke early myself, but she was gone.’

‘I see. Well, Mr Tisdall, if you’ve recovered I think we’ll be getting along.’

‘Yes. Yes, certainly. I’m all right.’ He got to his feet and together and in silence they traversed the beach, climbed the steps at the Gap, and came on the car where Tisdall said he had left it: in the shade of the trees where the track ended. It was a beautiful car, if a little too opulent. A cream-coloured two-seater with a space between the seats and the hood for parcels, or, at a pinch, for an extra passenger. From this space, the sergeant, exploring, produced a woman’s coat and a pair of the sheepskin boots popular with women at winter race-meetings.

‘That’s what she wore to go down to the beach. Just the coat and boots over her bathing things. There’s a towel, too.’

There was. The sergeant produced it: a brilliant object in green and orange.

‘Funny she didn’t take it to the beach with her,’ he said.

‘She liked to dry herself in the sun usually.’

‘You seem to know a lot about the habits of a lady whose name you didn’t know.’ The sergeant inserted himself into the second seat. ‘How long have you been living with her?’

‘Staying with her,’ amended Tisdall, his voice for the first time showing an edge. ‘Get this straight, Sergeant, and it may save you a lot of bother: Chris was my hostess. Not anything else. We stayed in her cottage unchaperoned, but a regiment of servants couldn’t have made our relations more correct. Does that strike you as so very peculiar?’

‘Very,’ said the sergeant frankly. ‘What are these doing here?’

He was peering into a paper bag which held two rather jaded buns.

‘Oh, I took these along for her to eat. They were all I could find. We always had a bun when we came out of the water when we were kids. I thought maybe she’d be glad of something.’

The car was slipping down the steep track to the main Westover-Stonegate road. They crossed the high-road and entered a deep lane on the other side. A signpost said “Medley 1, Liddlestone 3”.

‘So you had no intention of stealing the car when you set off to follow her to the beach?’

‘Certainly not!’ Tisdall said, as indignantly as if it made a difference. ‘It didn’t even cross my mind till I came up the hill and saw the car waiting there. Even now I can’t believe I really did it. I’ve been a fool, but I’ve never done anything like that before.’

‘Was she in the sea then?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t go to look. If I had seen her even in the distance I couldn’t have done it. I just slung the buns in and beat it. When I came to I was halfway to Canterbury. I just turned her round without stopping, and came straight back.’

The sergeant made no comment.

‘You still haven’t told me how long you’ve been staying at the cottage?’

‘Since Saturday midnight.’

It was now Thursday.

‘And you still ask me to believe that you don’t know your hostess’s last name?’

‘No. It’s a bit queer, I know. I thought so, myself, at first. I had a conventional upbringing. But she made it seem natural. After the first day we simply accepted each other. It was as if I had known her for years.’ As the sergeant said

nothing, but sat radiating doubt as a stove radiates heat, he added with a hint of temper: 'Why shouldn't I tell you her name if I knew it!'

'How should I know?' said the sergeant, unhelpfully. He considered out of the corner of his eye the young man's pale, if composed, face. He seemed to have recovered remarkably quickly from his exhibition of nerves and grief. Light-weights, these moderns. No real emotion about anything. Just hysteria. What they called love was just a barn-yard exercise; they thought anything else "sentimental". No discipline. No putting up with things. Every time something got difficult they ran away. Not slapped enough in their youth. All this modern idea about giving children their own way. Look what it led to. Howling on the beach one minute and as cool as a cucumber the next.

And then the sergeant noticed the trembling of the too-fine hands on the wheel. No, whatever else Robert Tisdall was he wasn't cool.

'This the place?' the sergeant asked, as they slowed down by a hedged garden.

'This is the place.'

It was a half-timbered cottage of about five rooms; shut in from the road by a seven-foot hedge of briar and honeysuckle, and dripping with roses. A godsend for Americans, week-enders, and photographers. The little windows yawned in the quiet, and the bright blue door stood hospitably open, disclosing in the shadow the gleam of a brass warming-pan on the wall. The cottage had been "discovered".

As they walked up the brick path a thin small woman appeared on the doorstep, brilliant in a white apron; her scanty hair drawn to a knob at the back of her head, and a round bird's-nest affair of black satin set insecurely at the very top of her arched shining poll.

Tisdall lagged as he caught sight of her, so that the sergeant's large official elevation should announce trouble to her with the clarity of a sandwich-board.

But Mrs Pitts was a policeman's widow, and no apprehension showed on her tight little face. Buttons coming up the path meant for her a meal in demand; her mind acted accordingly.

'I've been making some griddle cakes for breakfast. It's going to be hot later on. Best to let the stove out. Tell Miss Robinson when she comes in, will you, sir?' Then, realising that buttons were a badge of office: 'Don't tell me you've been driving without a licence, sir!'

'Miss—Robinson, is it? has met with an accident,' the sergeant said.

'The car! Oh, dear! She was always that reckless with it. Is she bad?'

'It wasn't the car. An accident in the water.'

'Oh,' she said slowly. '*That* bad!'

'How do you mean: that bad?'

'Accidents in the water only mean one thing.'

'Yes,' agreed the sergeant.

'Well, well,' she said, sadly contemplative. Then, her manner changing abruptly, 'And where were *you*?' she snapped, eyeing the drooping Tisdall as she eyed Saturday-night fish on a Westover fishmonger's slab. Her superficial deference to "gentry" had vanished in the presence of catastrophe. Tisdall appeared as the "bundle of uselessness" she had privately considered him.

The sergeant was interested but snubbing. 'The gentleman wasn't there.'

'He ought to have been there. He left just after her.'

'How do you know that?'

'I saw him. I live in the cottage down the road.'

'Do you know Miss Robinson's other address? I take it for granted this isn't her permanent home.'

‘No, of course it isn’t. She only has this place for a month. It belongs to Owen Hughes.’ She paused, impressively, to let the importance of the name sink in. ‘But he’s doing a film in Hollywood. About a Spanish count, it was to be, so he told me. He said he’s done Italian counts and French counts and he thought it would be a new experience for him to be a Spanish count. Very nice, Mr Hughes is. Not a bit spoilt in spite of all the fuss they make of him. You wouldn’t believe it, but a girl came to me once and offered me five pounds if I’d give her the sheets he had slept in. What I gave her was a piece of my mind. But she wasn’t a bit ashamed. Offered me twenty-five shillings for a pillow-slip. I don’t know what the world is coming to, that I don’t, what with—’

‘What other address had Miss Robinson?’

‘I don’t know any of her addresses but this one.’

‘Didn’t she write and tell you when she was coming?’

‘Write! No! She sent telegrams. I suppose she could write, but I’ll take my alfred davy she never did. About six telegrams a day used to go to the post office in Liddlestone. My Albert used to take them, mostly; between school. Some of them used three or four forms, they were that long.’

‘Do you know any of the people she had down here, then?’

‘She didn’t have any folks here. ‘Cept Mr Stannaway, that is.’

‘No one!’

‘Not a one. Once—it was when I was showing her the trick of flushing the W.C.; you have to pull hard and then let go smart-like—once she said: “Do you ever, Mrs Pitts,” she said, “get sick of the sight of people’s faces?” I said I got a bit tired of some. She said: “Not some, Mrs Pitts. All of them. Just sick of people.” I said when I felt like that I took a dose of castor oil. She laughed and said it wasn’t a bad idea. Only everyone should have one and what a good new world it would be in two days. “Mussolini never thought of that one,” she said.’

‘Was it London she came from?’

‘Yes. She went up just once or twice in the three weeks she’s been here. Last time was last week-end, when she brought Mr Stannaway back.’ Again her glance dismissed Tisdall as something less than human. ‘Doesn’t *he* know her address?’ she asked.

‘No one does,’ the sergeant said. ‘I’ll look through her papers and see what I can find.’

Mrs Pitts led the way into the living-room; cool, low-beamed, and smelling of sweet-peas.

‘What have you done with her—with the body, I mean?’ she asked.

‘At the mortuary.’

This seemed to bring home tragedy for the first time.

‘Oh, deary me.’ She moved the end of her apron over a polished table, slowly. ‘And me making griddle cakes.’

This was not a lament for wasted griddle cakes, but her salute to the strangeness of life.

‘I expect you’ll need breakfast,’ she said to Tisdall, softened by her unconscious recognition of the fact that the best are but puppets.

But Tisdall wanted no breakfast. He shook his head and turned away to the window, while the sergeant searched in the desk.

‘I wouldn’t mind one of those griddle cakes,’ the sergeant said, turning over papers.

‘You won’t get better in Kent, though it’s me that’s saying it. And perhaps Mr Stannaway will swallow some tea.’

She went away to the kitchen.

‘So you didn’t know her name was Robinson?’ said the sergeant, glancing up.

‘Mrs Pitts always addressed her as “miss”. And anyhow, did she look as if her name was Robinson!’

The sergeant, too, did not believe for a moment that her name was Robinson, so he let the subject drop.