

TRANSWORLD BOOKS

The Veteran

Frederick
Forsyth

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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THE VETERAN
AND OTHER STORIES

Frederick Forsyth

For Sandy,
who somehow still manages to put up with me

THE VETERAN

DAY ONE - TUESDAY

It was the owner of the small convenience store on the corner who saw it all. At least, he said he did.

He was inside the shop, but near the front window, rearranging his wares for better display, when he looked up and saw the man across the street. The man was quite unremarkable and the shopkeeper would have looked away but for the limp. He would testify later that there was no-one else on the street.

The day was hot beneath a skim of grey cloud, the atmosphere close and muggy. The hysterically named Paradise Way was as bleak and shabby as ever, a shopping parade in the heart of one of those graffiti-daubed, exhausted, crime-destroyed housing estates that deface the landscape between Leyton, Edmonton, Dalston and Tottenham.

When it was opened thirty years earlier with a grandiose civic ceremony, the Meadowdene Grove estate was hailed as a new style of low-budget council housing for working people. The name alone should have given the game away. It was not a meadow, it was not a dene and it had not seen a grove since the Middle Ages. It was, in fact, a grey poured-concrete gulag commissioned by a borough council that flew the red flag of world communism above the town hall and designed by architects who, for themselves, preferred honeysuckle-twined cottages in the country.

Meadowdene Grove then went downhill faster than the Tour de France coming off the Pyrenees. By 1996 the warren of passages, underpasses and alleys that linked the

grim residential blocks were crusted with filth, slick with urine and came alive only at night when gangs of local youths, unemployed and unemployable, roamed their manor to 'score' from the area drug peddlers.

Working-class pensioners, fiercely respectable, trying to cling to the old moralities, the comforting certainties of their own younger days, lived behind barricaded doors, fearful of the wolf packs outside.

Between the blocks, each seven storeys high, each door fronted by an open passage with greasy stairwells at either end, were patches of what had been green grass. A few rusted and abandoned cars, stripped to shells, crouched beside the inner roads that traversed the squares designed for public recreation and from which narrow passages ran through to Paradise Way.

The main shopping parade had once bustled with retail commerce, but most of the shops had finally closed, their proprietors exhausted by the struggle against pilfering, shoplifting, wilful damage, broken windows and racist abuse. More than half were now boarded up with defaced ply board or steel shutters and the few that stayed open for business tried to protect themselves with wire-mesh defences.

On the corner, Mr Veejay Patel soldiered on. As a ten-year-old he had come with his parents from Uganda, expelled by the brutalities of Idi Amin. Britain had taken them in. He was grateful. He still loved his adopted country, abided by the law, tried to be a good citizen, puzzled by the steady degeneration of standards that characterized the Nineties.

There are parts of what London's Metropolitan Police call the north-east quadrant where a stranger is unwise to roam. The limping man was a stranger.

He was barely fifteen yards from the corner when two men emerged from a concrete passage between two boarded shops and confronted him. Mr Patel froze and

watched. They were different, but equally menacing. He knew both types well. One of them was beefy, with a shaven skull and porcine face. Even at a distance of thirty yards, Mr Patel could see a ring glint in the left ear lobe. He wore baggy jeans and a soiled T-shirt. A beer belly sagged over his broad leather belt. He took up station foursquare in front of the stranger, who had no choice but to stop.

The second man was slimmer, in pale drill trousers and a grey zip-fronted windcheater. Lank, greasy hair fell just below his ears. He slipped behind the victim and waited there.

The beefy one raised his right fist, close to the face of the man to be mugged. Mr Patel saw the glint of metal on the fist. He could not hear what was said, but he saw the beefy one's mouth move as he spoke to the stranger. All the victim had to do was hand over his wallet, watch and any other valuables he might be carrying. With luck the muggers would grab the loot and run; the victim might survive unscathed.

He was probably silly to do what he did. He was outnumbered and outweighed. To judge from his grey hair, he was middle-aged and clearly his limp indicated he was not fully mobile. But he fought back.

Mr Patel saw his right hand come up from his side, moving extremely fast. He seemed to sway slightly at the hips, turning his shoulders to add force to the blow. The beefy one took it full on the nose. What had been a silent mime was pierced by a shout of pain that Mr Patel could hear even through his plate-glass window.

The beefy one staggered back, throwing both hands to his face, and Mr Patel saw the gleam of blood between the fingers. When he made his statement, the shopkeeper had to pause to recall clearly and in sequence what happened next. Lank Hair swept in a hard punch to the kidneys from behind, then kicked the older man in the back of his good

knee. It was enough. The victim went down to the pavement.

On the Meadowdene Grove estate footwear was either trainers (for speed) or heavy boots (for kicking). Both these assailants had boots. The man on the pavement had doubled himself into the embryo position to protect his vitals, but there were four boots going for him and the beefy one, still clutching his nose one-handed, went for the head.

There were, the shopkeeper later estimated, about twenty kicks, maybe more, until the victim had ceased to twist and turn. Lank Hair bent over him, flicked open his jacket and went for the inside pocket.

Mr Patel saw the hand come back out, a wallet held between forefinger and thumb. Then both men straightened, turned and ran back up the concrete passage to disappear in the warren of alleys that riddled the estate. Before they went, the beefy one tore his T-shirt out of his jeans and held it up to staunch the blood pouring from his nose.

The shopkeeper watched them disappear, then scuttled back behind his counter where he kept the telephone. He dialled 999 and gave his name and address to the operator, who insisted she could not summon any emergency service until she knew who was calling. When the formalities had been accomplished, Mr Patel asked for police and an ambulance. Then he returned to the front window.

The man still lay on the opposite pavement, quite inert. No-one tended him. This was not the sort of street where people wanted to get involved. Mr Patel would have crossed the road to do what he could, but he knew nothing of first aid, feared to move the man and make a mistake, feared for his shop and that the muggers might come back. So he waited.

The squad car was first and it took less than four minutes. The two police constables inside had by chance

been less than half a mile away on the Upper High Road when they took the call. Both knew the estate and the location of Paradise Way. Both had been on duty during the spring race riots.

As the car screeched to a halt and the wail of the siren died away, one of the PCs emerged from the passenger door and ran over to the figure on the pavement. The other remained at the wheel and used the radio to confirm that an ambulance was on its way. Mr Patel could see both officers looking across the street towards his shop, checking the address source of the 999 call, but neither of them came over to him. That could wait. The officers' gaze turned away as the ambulance, lights flashing and siren wailing, came round the corner. A few gawpers had congregated up and down Paradise Way, but they kept their distance. The police would later try to interview them for witnesses, but merely waste their time. On Meadowdene Grove you watched for fun, but you did not help the fuzz.

There were two paramedics, skilled and experienced men. For them, as for the police, procedures are procedures and must be followed to the letter.

'It looks like a mugging and a kicking,' the constable kneeling beside the body remarked. 'Possibly a bad one.'

The paramedics nodded and went to work. There was no blood flow to staunch, so the first priority was to stabilize the neck. Victims of crash and beating trauma can be finished off there and then if the cervical vertebrae have already been damaged and are then abused even more by unskilled manhandling. The two men quickly fitted a semi-rigid collar to prevent the neck from wobbling side to side.

The next procedure was to get him onto a spine board to immobilize both neck and back. That was done right there on the pavement. Only then could the man be lifted onto a gurney and hefted into the back of the ambulance. The paramedics were quick and efficient. Within five minutes of swerving into the kerbside they were ready to roll.

‘I’ll have to come with you,’ said the constable on the pavement, ‘he might make a statement.’

Professionals in the emergency services know pretty exactly who does what and why. It saves time. The paramedic nodded. The ambulance was his territory and he was in charge, but the police had a job to do, too. He already knew that the chances of the injured man uttering a word were out of the window, so he just muttered, ‘Stay out of the way. This is a bad one.’

The constable clambered aboard and sat well up forward, close to the bulkhead of the driving compartment; the driver slammed the doors and ran to his cab. His partner bent over the man on the gurney. Two seconds later the ambulance was racing down Paradise Way, past the staring onlookers, its high-pitched siren scream clearing a path as it swerved into the traffic-choked High Road. The constable clung on and watched another pro at work.

Airway, always clear the airway. A blockage of blood and mucus in the windpipe can choke a patient to death almost as fast as a bullet. The paramedic used a suction pump which yielded a small amount of mucus, the sort a smoker might contain, but little blood. Air passage free, breathing shallow but sufficient to sustain life. To be safe, the paramedic clamped an oxygen mask with attached reservoir bag over the swollen face. It was the rapid swelling that worried him; he knew the sign too well.

Pulse check: regular but already too fast, another possible sign of cerebral trauma. The Glasgow Coma Scale measures the alertness of the human brain on a scale of 15. Fully awake and completely alert gives 15 over 15. A test showed the patient was eleven over fifteen and falling. A figure of three is deep coma, under that – death.

‘Royal London,’ he shouted over the wail of the siren. ‘A and E plus neuro.’

The driver nodded, went through a major crossroads against the lights as cars and trucks pulled over, then

changed tack towards Whitechapel. The Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel Road has an advanced neurosurgical unit; one nearer to the ambulance's position did not, but if 'neuro' were needed, the extra few driving minutes would pay dividends.

The driver was talking to his control, giving his exact position in South Tottenham, estimated time of arrival at the Royal London, and asking for a complete Accident and Emergency trauma team to be ready and waiting.

The paramedic in the back was right. One of the possible call signs of major head injury, particularly after an assault, is that the soft tissue of the entire face and head swells rapidly to a great, bloated, unrecognizable gargoyle. The face of the injured man had begun swelling back on the pavement; by the time the ambulance swerved into the A and E bay at the Royal, the face was like a football. The doors crashed open; the gurney was lowered into the care of the trauma team. There were three doctors under the command of the consultant, Mr Carl Bateman; these were an anaesthetist and two juniors; there were also three nurses.

They enveloped the gurney, lifted the patient (still on the spine board) onto one of their own trolleys and wheeled him away.

'I'll need my spine board back,' shouted the paramedic, but no-one heard him. He would have to collect it the next day. The policeman scrambled out.

'Where do I go?' he asked.

'In there,' said the paramedic, 'but don't get in the way.'

The constable nodded obediently and trotted through the swing doors, still hoping for a statement. The only one he got was from a senior staff nurse.

'Sit there,' she said, 'and don't get in the way.'

Within half an hour Paradise Way was a buzz of activity. A uniformed inspector from the Dover Street police station, known simply in those parts as the Dover 'nick', had taken

charge. The street up and down from the attack site had been cordoned off with striped tape. A dozen officers were quartering the area, concentrating on the shops along the parade and the six floors of flats that stood above them. The apartments across the road from the scene of the crime were of particular interest, for anyone looking out and down might well have seen it all. But it was uphill work. Reactions varied from genuine apology through bovine denial to outright abuse. The door-knocking went on.

The inspector had quickly called for a fellow-rank officer from CID, for it was clear this was a job for detectives. At the Dover nick DI Jack Burns had been summoned from a half-drunk and much-treasured cup of tea in the canteen to the presence of Detective Superintendent Alan Parfitt to be told to take over the Paradise Way mugging. He protested that he was handling a chain of car thefts, a hit-and-run and was due in court the next morning. To no avail. Shortage of staff, he was told. August, bloody August, he growled as he left.

He arrived at the scene with his partner Detective Sergeant Luke Skinner just about the same time as the POLSA team. The Police Search units do an unlovely job. Dressed in heavy-duty overalls and protective gloves, their task is to search the areas round crime scenes for clues. Clues are not always obvious at first glance so the general rule is to grab it, bag it and find out what it is later. The job can also be very mucky, involving crawling on hands and knees in some rather unpleasant places. The Meadowdene Grove estate was not a pleasant place.

‘There’s a missing wallet, Jack,’ said the uniformed inspector who had already spoken to Mr Patel. ‘And one of the assailants had his nose bloodied. He was holding the hem of his T-shirt to his face as he ran off. May have sprayed blood on the floor.’

Burns nodded. While the POLSA searchers scoured the smelly passages of the concrete blocks on hands and knees and the uniformed men tried to find another eyewitness, Jack Burns entered the shop of Mr Veejay Patel.

‘I am Detective Inspector Burns,’ he said, offering his warrant card, ‘and this is DS Skinner. I gather you were the one who made the 999 call?’

Mr Patel surprised Jack Burns, who came from Devon and had been three years with the Met, the whole time at Dover nick. In his native county he was accustomed to citizens helping the police where, when and as they could, but north-east London had been a shock. Mr Patel reminded him of Devon. He really wanted to help. He was clear, concise and precise. In a lengthy statement taken down by DS Skinner, he explained exactly what he had seen, and gave clear descriptions of the assailants. Jack Burns warmed to him. If only all cases included a witness like Veejay Patel of Entebbe and Edmonton. Dusk was settling over Meadowdene Grove when he signed DS Skinner’s handwritten statement.

‘I would like you to come down to the station and look at some photographs, if you would, sir,’ said Burns at last. ‘You might be able to spot these two men. It would save an awful lot of time if we knew who we were looking for exactly.’

Mr Patel was apologetic.

‘Not tonight, if you please. I am alone in the shop. I close at ten. But tomorrow my brother returns. He has been on holiday, you see. August. I could get away in the morning.’

Burns thought. Court appearance at ten thirty. Formal remand. He would have to leave it to Skinner.

‘Eleven o’clock? You know the Dover Street station? Just ask for me at the front desk.’

‘Not often you meet that sort,’ said Skinner as they crossed the road to their car.

‘I like him,’ said Burns. ‘When we get those bastards, I think we might have a result.’

On the drive back to Dover Street DI Burns discovered by radio where the injured man had been taken and which constable was watching over him. Five minutes later they were in contact.

‘I want everything he possessed – clothes, effects, the lot – bagged and brought to the nick,’ he told the young officer. ‘And an ID. We still don’t know who he is. When you’ve got it all, call up and we’ll send a replacement for you.’

Mr Carl Bateman was not concerned either for the name and address of the man on the trolley, or yet who had done these things to him. His concern was keeping him alive. From the docking bay, the trolley had come straight through to the resuscitation room where the A and E team went to work. Mr Bateman was sure there were multiple injuries inflicted here, but the rules were clear: life-threatening first, the rest can wait. So he went through the ABCD procedure.

A is for airway. The paramedic had done a good job. Airway was clear, despite a slight wheezing. The neck was immobilized.

B is for breathing. The consultant had the jacket and shirt torn open, then went over the chest area both front and back with a stethoscope.

He detected a couple of cracked ribs but they, like the mashed knuckles of the left hand and the broken teeth in the mouth, were not life-threatening and could wait. Despite the ribs, the patient was still breathing regularly. There is little point in performing spectacular orthopaedic surgery if the patient decides to stop breathing. The pulse worried him; it had left the normal 80 mark and climbed above 100. Too fast: a probable sign of inner trauma.

C is for circulation. In less than a minute, Mr Bateman had two intravenous catheters in place. One drained off 20 millilitres of blood for immediate analysis; then, while the

rest of the examination proceeded, a litre of crystalloid fluid went into each arm.

D is for disability. This was not good. The face and head were hardly recognizable as belonging to a human being and the Glasgow Scale showed the man was now 6 over 15 and fading dangerously. There was serious cerebral damage here, and not for the first time Carl Bateman thanked the unknown paramedic who had spent a few extra minutes getting the man to the Royal and its neuro unit.

He called up the scanner unit and told them he would have his patient there in five minutes. Then the consultant called his colleague Mr Paul Willis, the senior neurosurgeon.

'I think I must have a major intra-cranial haematoma here, Paul. Glasgow is now at five and still dropping.'

'Get him in as soon as you have a scan for me,' said the neurosurgeon.

When he was knocked down the man had been wearing socks and shoes, underpants, shirt - open at the neck, trousers held up by a belt, jacket and a light raincoat. Everything below the waist was not a problem and had simply been pulled down. To prevent jolting of the neck and head, the raincoat, jacket and shirt were just cut off. Then everything was bagged, pocket contents still in place, and given to the delighted constable waiting outside. He was soon replaced and able to take his trophies back to Dover Street and an expectant Jack Burns.

The scanner confirmed Carl Bateman's worst fears. The man was haemorrhaging into the brain cavity. The blood was pressing upon the brain itself with a force that would soon prove lethal or irreversible.

At eight fifteen the patient entered brain surgery. Mr Willis, guided by the scans that showed exactly where the intra-cranial pressure was being exerted, could reach the haematoma with a single insertion. Three small holes were

drilled in the skull, then linked with saw-cuts to create a perfect triangle, the standard operation.

With this triangle of bone removed, the haematoma was drained of the blood causing the pressure, and the damaged arteries leaking into the brain cavity were tied off. With the blood sacs gone, the pressure was eased and the brain was able to expand back into the full space that had been its natural area.

The triangle of bone was replaced and the flap of scalp stitched over it. Heavy bandaging would keep both in place until nature could take its course and heal. Despite the damage, Mr Willis was hopeful that he had been in time.

The body is a weird contraption. It can die from bee stings or recover from massive trauma. When a haematoma is removed and the brain allowed to expand back to its full cavity size, patients can simply recover consciousness and perform quite lucidly within days. No-one would know for twenty-four hours, until the anaesthesia wore off. By day two, without recovery, there would be cause for concern. Mr Willis scrubbed off, changed and went home to St John's Wood.

'Bugger all,' said Jack Burns, staring at the clothes and personal effects. The latter included a half-smoked pack of cigarettes, half a box of matches, assorted coins, a soiled handkerchief and a single key on a ribbon, apparently for a house door somewhere. These had come from the trousers. From the jacket, nothing. Whatever else the man had carried, the wallet must have contained it all.

'A neat man,' said Skinner, who had been examining the clothes. 'Shoes, cheap and patched, but an effort has been made at a shine. Trousers, cheap, worn, but a crease down each front leg, made by an iron. Shirt, frayed at neck and cuffs, but also ironed. A man with no money, but trying to keep up appearances.'

'Well, I wish he'd kept a credit card or a letter addressed to himself in a back trouser pocket,' said Burns, who was

still plodding through the endless form-filling required of today's policeman. 'I'll have to log him as a UAM for the moment.'

The Americans would call him a John Doe. The London Met refers to an Unidentified Adult Male. It was still warm, but the night was pitch-black when the two detectives locked away the paperwork and saw they had time for a quick pint before going home.

A mile away, the neat man lay face up in the intensive care unit of the Royal London, breathing shallow but regular, pulse still too high, checked every now and then by the night sister.

Jack Burns took a long draught of his beer.

'Who the hell is he?' he complained to no-one in particular.

'Don't worry, guv, we'll find out soon enough,' said Luke Skinner. But he was wrong.

DAY TWO – WEDNESDAY

For DI Jack Burns it was a brutally busy day. It brought two triumphs, two disappointments and a host of still unanswered questions. But that was par for the course. Rarely is a detective blessed with a case wrapped up like a Christmas parcel simply being delivered to his desk.

His first success was with Mr Patel. The shopkeeper was at the front desk on the dot of eleven, as eager to help as ever.

'I would like you to look at some photographs,' said Burns when they were seated in front of what looked like a TV screen. In his younger days the Criminal Records Office photos, known throughout the force as the mug shots, were contained in a large album, or several such, shielded behind plastic sheeting. Burns still preferred the old way, for the witness could flip forward and back until he had

made his choice. But the process was now electronic, and the faces flashed up on the screen.

There were 100 to start with, and they covered some of the 'hard cases' known to the police in the immediate north-east quadrant of London. Not that 100 was the limit, not by a long way, but Burns began with a selection all known to the Dover nick. Mr Veejay Patel turned out to be a detective's dream.

As number 28 flashed up he said, 'That one.'

They were staring at a brutish face combining considerable stupidity with equal malevolence. Beefy, shorn skull, earring.

'You are sure? Never seen him before? Never been in your shop, for example?'

'No, not this one. But he was the one who took the blow to the nose.'

Mark Price, said the caption, and there was an identification number. At 77, Mr Patel got his second, the one with a long sallow face and lank hair falling to the ear lobes on each side. Harry Cornish. He had no doubt on either face and had not even paused for more than a second or two for any of the other faces. Burns closed the machine down. The CRO would come up with the full files on each man.

'When I have traced and arrested these men, I shall ask you to attend an identification parade,' said Burns. The shopkeeper nodded. He was willing. When he had gone, Luke Skinner remarked, 'Strewth, guv, we could do with a few more like him.'

While waiting for the CRO computer to come up with the full files on Price and Cornish, Jack Burns put his head round the corner of the CID squad room. The man he wanted was poring over a desk. More form-filling.

'Charlie, got a minute?'

Charlie Coulter was still a detective sergeant, but older than Burns, and he had been on the plot at Dover nick for

fifteen years. When it came to local villains he knew them all.

‘Those two?’ he snorted. ‘Right animals, Jack. Bags of form. Not local; moved in about three years ago. Mostly small, low-intelligence stuff. Bag-snatching, mugging, pilfering, brawling, football hooligans. Plus some actual bodily harm. Both done time. Why?’

‘This time it’s grievous bodily harm,’ said Burns. ‘Kicked some old man into a coma yesterday. Got an address for them?’

‘Not offhand,’ said Coulter. ‘The last I heard they shared a squat somewhere off the High Road.’

‘Not on the Grove?’

‘Don’t think so. That’s not normally their patch. They must have been visiting, on the off chance.’

‘Do they run with a gang?’

‘Nope. Loners. They just hang around with each other.’

‘Gay?’

‘No record of it. Probably not. Cornish was done for an indecent assault. On a woman. It fell through. She changed her mind. Probably frightened off by Price.’

‘Druggies?’

‘Not known for it. Boozers, more like it. Pub brawls a speciality.’

At that point Coulter’s phone rang and Burns left him alone. The CRO files came through and gave an address. Burns went to see his Chief Super, Alan Parfitt, and got permission for what he wanted. By two p.m. a magistrate had signed a search warrant for the named premises, two licensed officers had drawn sidearms from the armoury. Burns, Skinner and six others, one toting a door-rammer, made up the team of ten.

The raid was at three. The house was old and scrofulous, destined for demolition once the developer had acquired the entire row; in the interim, it was boarded up and services had been cut off.

The peeling door sustained one very perfunctory knock, then the rammer splintered the lock and they were running up the stairs. The two thugs lived on the first floor up, in a pair of rooms that had never been much but were now a tip of considerable squalor. Neither man was at home. The two Armed Response officers holstered their guns and the search began.

The rummage team were looking for anything and everything. A wallet, former contents thereof, clothing, boots ... They were not especially gentle. If the place had been a tawdry squat when they arrived, it was hardly home-sweet-home when they left. But they came up with only one trophy. Rolled up and tossed behind a shabby old sofa was a grubby T-shirt, its front crusted with blood. It was bagged and tagged. All other items of clothing went the same way. If forensic could find fibres on anything that must have come from the victim's clothing, that match would put the thugs on the spot, at the time, and in physical contact with the limping man.

While the searchers did their business, Burns and Skinner quartered the street. Most neighbours knew the two thugs by sight, none spoke favourably of them, mainly because of their habit of rolling home drunk and noisy in the small hours, and no-one knew where they were or might be in the middle of an August afternoon.

Back at the station Jack Burns started on the telephone. He asked for an 'all points' on the missing men, made one quick call with a simple enquiry to Mr Carl Bateman, the A and E surgeon at the Royal London, and then rang around the A and E departments at three other hospitals. A junior doctor at the St Anne's Road hospital came up trumps.

'Gotcha,' shouted Burns as he put the phone down. There is a hunter instinct in a good detective, the knowledge of a nice adrenalin rush when the evidence is coming together. He turned to DS Skinner.

‘Get down to St Anne’s. Find a Dr Melrose in A and E. Get a full signed statement. Take a photo of Mark Price for identification. Get a photocopy of the accident log for the whole of yesterday afternoon. Then bring it all back here.’

‘What happened?’ asked Skinner, catching the mood.

‘A man answering to Price’s description wandered in there yesterday with a sore nose. Dr Melrose discovered it was broken in two places. When we find him, that hooter will be reset and heavily strapped. And Melrose will give us a firm ID.’

‘When was this, guv?’

‘Guess. Just on five p.m. yesterday afternoon.’

‘Three hours after the punch in Paradise Way. We’re going to get a result on this one.’

‘Yes, lad, I think we are. Now get over there.’

While Skinner was away, Burns took a call from the sergeant who had led the POLSA team. It was disappointing. Before sundown the previous day they had scoured every inch of that estate on hands and knees. They had crawled into every nook and cranny, examined every passage and alley, culled every patch of weary grass and every slick gutter. They had removed and emptied the only five public garbage cans they could find.

They had a collection of used condoms, dirty syringes and greasy food wrappings typical of such a place. But they had no blood and no wallet.

Cornish must have stuffed the stolen wallet into one of his own pockets until he could examine the prize at his leisure. Cash he would have taken and spent, the rest he would have thrown away somewhere, but not on the Meadowdene Grove estate. And he lived half a mile away. That was a big area, too many trash cans, too many alleys, too many builders’ skips. It could be anywhere. It could, O blessed joy, still be in one of his pockets. Neither he nor Price would ever be contestants on *Mastermind*.

As for Price, stuffing his T-shirt over his bleeding nose must have kept the blood from falling to the pavement until he was well clear of the estate. Still, one superb eyewitness and the evidence of the broken nose at St Anne's just three hours after the punch was not bad for a day's work.

His next call was from Mr Bateman. That, too, was a slight disappointment, but not disastrous. His last call was a beauty. It came from DS Coulter, who had more snouts out in the territory than anyone else. A whisper down the line had told him Cornish and Price were playing pool at a hall in Dalston.

Luke Skinner was entering the front lobby as Burns came down the stairs. He had a complete statement from Dr Melrose, positive ID and a copy of the treatment log in which Price had identified himself under his true name. Burns told him to lock up the evidence and join him in the car.

The two thugs were still playing pool when the police arrived. Burns kept it short and businesslike. He had back-up in the form of a police van with six uniformed men who now protected all the doors. The other pool players just watched with the engaged curiosity of those not in trouble observing someone who is.

Price glared at Burns with piggy eyes flanking a broad band of plaster over the bridge of his nose.

'Mark Price, I am arresting you on suspicion of grievous bodily harm on an unidentified adult male at or about two twenty p.m. yesterday afternoon at Paradise Way, Edmonton. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence.'

Price shot a panicky glance at Cornish, who evidently passed for the brains of the outfit. Cornish gave a slight shake of his head.

‘Piss off, filth,’ said Price. He was spun around, cuffed and marched out. Two minutes later Cornish followed. Both went into the van with the six constables and the small cavalcade returned to Dover nick.

Procedures, always procedures. In the car on the way back, Burns asked for the FMO (force medical officer) to be summoned as a matter of emergency. The last thing he needed was a later claim that police brutality had in any way contributed to that nose. Also, he needed a blood sample to compare with the blood on the T-shirt. If there was any of the victim’s blood on that shirt, that would do it.

As he awaited the arrival of a blood sample from the man in the coma, he pondered the disappointing reply from Mr Bateman to his query concerning the right fist.

It was going to be a long night. Arrest had been at 7.15 p.m. That gave him twenty-four hours before either his chief superintendent gave him twelve further hours, or the local magistrates gave him a further twenty-four.

As arresting officer, he would have to fill out yet another report, signed and witnessed. He would need a sworn statement from the FMO that both men were fit enough to be questioned. He would need every stitch of their clothing and the contents of all pockets, plus blood samples for elimination.

Luke Skinner, watching like a hawk, had already made sure neither man jettisoned anything from their pockets as they were arrested and marched out of the pool hall and into the van. But no-one had been able to prevent Cornish telling the police constables that he wanted a lawyer, and fast. Until then, he was saying nothing. This message was not for the policemen; it was for his thick accomplice. And Price got the message, loud and clear.

The procedures took over an hour. Dusk was descending. The FMO departed, leaving behind his statement as to the fitness of both men to be questioned, and the state of Price’s nose at the time of arrest.

Both thugs were lodged in separate cells, both dressed in paper one-piece overalls. Both had had a cup of tea and would later receive a canteen fry-up. By the book, always by the book.

Burns looked in on Price.

'I want a brief,' said Price. 'I ain't saying nothing.'

Cornish was the same. He just smiled and insisted on a lawyer.

The duty solicitor was Mr Lou Slade. He was disturbed over his supper, but insisted he wished to see his clients before turning in for the night. He arrived at Dover Street just before nine. He met both his new clients and spent half an hour closeted with them in an interview room.

'You can now conduct the interviews in my presence if you wish, Detective Inspector,' he said when he emerged. 'But I have to say my clients will make no statement. They deny the charge. They say they were nowhere near the place in question at the time in question.'

He was an experienced lawyer and had handled similar cases. He had got the measure of his clients and believed not a word, but he had a job to do.

'If you wish,' said Burns. 'But the case is very strong and building steadily. If they went for an admission, I might even believe the victim hit his head on the pavement as he fell. With their records ... say, a couple of years in the Ville.' Pentonville was known locally as the 'Ville'.

Privately, Burns knew there were a score of kick marks on the injured man, and Slade knew he knew.

'Stinking fish, Mr Burns. And I'm not buying. They intend to deny. I shall want all you have got under the disclosure rules.'

'In due course, Mr Slade. And I shall need any claim of alibi well in time. But you know the rules as well as I.'

'How long can you keep them?' asked Slade.

'Seven fifteen tomorrow night. Twelve hours extra from my super would not be enough. I'll almost certainly want an

extension in custody from the magistrates tomorrow, around five p.m., the last hearing of the evening.'

'I shall not oppose,' said Slade. He knew not to try and waste time. These were two thugs and they had half-killed a man. The magistrates would extend the custody remand without a blink. 'As for your interviews, I suppose you will insist, even though on my advice they will say nothing.'

"Fraid so.'

'Then as I am sure we both have homes to go to, may I suggest nine tomorrow morning?'

It was agreed. Slade went home. Price and Cornish were locked up for the night. Burns had one last call to make. When he was connected to the Royal London he asked for the duty nurse in the ICU. The injured man might, just might, have come to.

Mr Paul Willis was also working late that night. He had operated on a young motorcyclist who seemed to have tried to break the land-speed record coming down Archway Hill. The neurosurgeon had done his best, but privately he gave the motorcycle rider a fifty-fifty chance of seeing out the week. He heard about Burns's call after the staff nurse had put the phone down.

The twenty-four hours since anaesthetic was administered had elapsed. With its effects gone, he would have hoped for the first signs of stirring. Before heading home he went to look again at the limping man.

There was no change. The monitors indicated a regular heartbeat, but the blood pressure was still too high, one of the signs of brain damage. On the Glasgow Scale the patient still hovered around 3 over 15, deep coma.

'I'll give it another thirty-six hours,' he told the staff nurse. 'I was hoping to get away this weekend, but I'll come in on Saturday morning. Unless there is a happy sign of recovery, in which case, not. Would you leave a note that I be informed of a change for the better, either here or at

home? If there's no change by Saturday, nine a.m., I'll want a rescan. Please book it for me.'

The second day ended with Price and Cornish, stuffed with fried food, snoring ox-like in their cells at Dover Street nick. The victim lay on his back wired to three monitoring machines under a low blue light, locked into some faraway private world.

Mr Willis cast thoughts of patients from his mind for a while and watched an old Clint Eastwood spaghetti western in his elegant house in St John's Wood Terrace. DS Luke Skinner was just in time for a date with a very pretty drama student from the Hampstead School whom he had met in the crush bar at a Beethoven concert a month earlier. This was the sort of taste (Beethoven, not girls) that he emphatically did not discuss in the Dover nick canteen.

DI Jack Burns returned to rustle up some baked beans on toast in an otherwise empty house in Camden Town, wishing that Jenny and the boys would return from their holiday at Salcombe, in his native Devon, where he dearly wished he could have joined them. August, he thought, bloody August.

DAY THREE - THURSDAY

The interviews with Price and Cornish turned out to be useless. It was not Jack Burns's fault; he was a skilled and experienced interrogator. He took Price first, knowing him to be the more dense of the two. With Lou Slade sitting quietly by his client's side, Burns took the line of sweet reason.

'Look, Mark, we've got you bang to rights. There's a witness, saw it all. Everything. Start to finish. And he is going to testify.'

He waited. Nothing.

‘For the tape, my client declines to make a statement,’ murmured Slade.

‘Then he hit you right on the nose, Mark. Broke your ruddy hooter. No wonder you lost your rag. Why on earth did an old guy like that do it?’

Price might have muttered, ‘I dunno,’ or, ‘Stupid old git.’ That would have gone down well with the jury. Admission of presence at the scene. Bang goes any alibi. Price glared but stayed silent.

‘Then there’s your blood, Mark. Pouring out the broken nose. We’ve got samples, laddie.’

He was careful not to say he only had blood from the T-shirt, not the pavement, but he did not tell an untruth. Price shot a panicky glance at Slade, who also looked worried. Privately the lawyer knew that if samples of his client’s blood, proved by DNA tests to be Price’s blood and no-one else’s, had been found on the pavement close to the beaten man, there would be no defence. But he still had time for a change of plea, if necessary. Under the disclosure rules, he would insist on everything Burns had got, and long before any trial. So he just shook his head, and Price’s silence went on.

Burns gave each defendant an hour of his best efforts, then packed it in.

‘I shall need to make an application for extension of police custody,’ he told Slade when Price and Cornish were back in their cells. ‘Four this afternoon?’

Slade nodded. He would be present, but say virtually nothing. There would be no point.

‘And I am setting up two identity parades for tomorrow morning at St Anne’s Road. If I get two results, I shall go for a formal charge and then a remand in custody,’ he added. Slade nodded and left.

As he drove back to his office, the duty solicitor had little doubt this was not going to go his clients’ way. Burns was good at his job: meticulous, thorough, not given to silly

mistakes that the defence could exploit. He also thought privately that his clients were guilty as hell. He had seen their record sheets and so would the magistrates that afternoon. Whoever the mystery witness was, if he was a respectable person and stuck to his guns, Price and Cornish would not be seeing much daylight for a long time.

Years before, the police used to carry out identity parades inside the station. The new method was to have Identification Suites dotted at various places around the city. The nearest to Dover nick was in St Anne's Road, just down the pavement from the hospital where Dr Melrose worked and Price had had his nose attended to. It was a more efficient system. Each suite was equipped with the latest in parade platform, lighting and one-way mirrors through which the identification could be made without the chance that a real hard case could 'eyeball' the witness and terrify him into silence without a word being said. The suites also had an on-call panel of men and women of different sizes and aspects to make up the parade at short notice. These volunteers were paid £15 to appear, stand in line and then walk out again. Burns asked for two parades, giving careful descriptions of his prisoners, for eleven a.m. the next day.

Luke Skinner was left to handle the media, to whom Burns had a deep aversion. Anyway, the DS did it better. He was that fairly rare phenomenon, the public-school-educated policeman, with a polish much mocked in the canteen, but very useful on occasion.

All press enquiries had to funnel through Scotland Yard, which had an entire bureau dedicated to public affairs, and they had asked for a brief statement. It was still a low-interest case, but apart from a serious wounding there was also a missing-person angle. Skinner's problem was that he had no good description and certainly no picture, because the injured man was simply unsketchable with his bloated head swathed in bandage.

So Skinner would simply appeal for anyone who had gone missing from home or work in the Tottenham/Edmonton area the previous Tuesday and had not been seen since. A man who walked with a pronounced limp, between fifty and fifty-five, short grey hair, medium height, medium build. August was a thin month for news; the media might carry the item, but not intensively.

Nevertheless, there was one paper that might give the item a good run and he had a contact on it. He had lunch with the reporter on the *Edmonton and Tottenham Express*, the local rag that covered the whole area of the Dover Street nick. The reporter took notes and promised to do what he could.

The civil courts may go into recess for a long vacation in the summer, but the network of criminal courts never ceases to labour. Over 90 per cent of lawbreaking is handled by the magistrates' courts and the processes of the law have much to go on seven days a week and every week in the year. Much of the day-to-day work is carried out by lay magistrates who take no pay but work as a civic duty. They handle the mass of minor offences – traffic violations, issuing of warrants for arrest or search, drinking-licence extensions, minor theft, affray. And the granting of extensions to police custody or remands to prison to await trial. If a serious case comes before the magistrates' court, it is the modern custom for a paid stipendiary magistrate, a qualified lawyer, to take the bench, sitting alone.

That afternoon, Court No. 3 at the Highbury Corner court was in the charge of three lay magistrates, chaired by Mr Henry Spellar, a retired headmaster. The issue was so simple it took but a few seconds.

When it was over, Price and Cornish were led away and driven back to Dover Street. Burns reported to Detective Superintendent Parfitt.

'How's it going, Jack?' asked the head of the whole CID branch at Dover Street.

‘Frustrating, sir. It started fast and well, with an excellent witness who saw it all. Start to finish. Respectable shopkeeper across the road. Good citizen. No hesitation at ID and prepared to testify. I am short of the missing wallet taken from the victim. Plus forensics linking Price and Cornish to the time and the place. I’ve got Price’s broken nose and the treatment of that nose in St Anne’s just three hours later. It tallies perfectly with the eyewitness statement.’

‘So what is holding you?’

‘I need the wallet, linkage to the thugs; I need forensics to hurry up, and I’d like to ID the victim. He’s still a UAM.’

‘Are you going to charge them?’

‘If Mr Patel picks them out of the line tomorrow, yes, sir. They mustn’t walk on this one. They’re both guilty as hell.’

Alan Parfitt nodded.

‘All right, Jack. I’ll try and chivvy forensics. Keep me and the CPS informed.’

At the Royal London dusk fell again but the man in ICU did not see it. It had been forty-eight hours since the operation; the effects of the anaesthetics were long gone, but he did not flicker. He was still far away in his own world.

DAY FOUR – FRIDAY

The newspaper came out and it had given Luke Skinner a good spread. The story was the second lead, front page. The reporter took the angle: Limping Mystery Man – Who Is He? Police Ask. There was a description of the assault and reference to two local men who were ‘helping the police with their inquiries’. This is one of those much-used phrases comparable with hospital bulletins that describe people in absolute agony as being ‘comfortable’. It means the opposite and everyone knows it.