

SIMON BRETT
THE DEAD SIDE
OF THE MIKE



CRIME & MYSTERY



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The Charles Paris Mystery Series

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THE DEAD SIDE OF THE MIKE

A Charles Paris Mystery

Simon Brett



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Except where actual historical events and characters are being described for the storyline of this novel, all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

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TO DORIS who will understand that I'm only giving the hand that fed me an affectionate nibble (and
~~with thanks to John for the title and to David, Peter and Richard for their help)~~

CHAPTER ONE

CHARLES PARIS PAUSED at the top of the steps leading down to the Ariel Bar, momentarily unable to see a path through its voluble mass of humanity to the source of alcohol. Mark Lear, with the assurance of a BBC native, plunged into the thicket of people, a rhetorical, 'What do you want' thrown over his shoulder. Rhetorical, because he had known his guest long enough to supply the answer, 'A large Bell's.'

Charles managed to wedge himself against a high ledge just inside the door. It was hot; the weather had suddenly changed and, for the first time that year, in early July, offered the possibility of summer. Above the babbling surface of heads, he could see the room's fine ceiling, which still boasted the building's ancestry, its luxurious past as the Langham Hotel, where elegance had occasionally reigned and Ouida occasionally entertained guardsmen. But now the petalled roses and coving of the ceiling had been painted in the institutional colours of a hospital or government office. Proper BBC austerity. By all means let the staff enjoy themselves, but let them not be seen to enjoy themselves. For a moment the drab paint over the fine curlicues of the ceiling seemed a symbol of the organisation, of flamboyant creativity restrained by proper Civil Service circumspection.

Still, it was comforting. Charles always felt on BBC Radio premises as he did on entering a church, not that he shared the faith of the celebrants, but that it was reassuring to know such faith still existed. He relaxed. He had found the afternoon a strain. It was always difficult to explain to fellow-actors who hadn't done radio why one should feel tension working with the permanent safety-net of a script, but total reliance on voice, without any of the rest of an actor's armoury, imposed new anxieties. Even when working with a producer as sympathetically cynical as Mark Lear.

Mark worked in Further Education (a department whose exact function and intended audience Charles could never grasp) and that afternoon they had been recording a programme on Swinburne. It was one of a series called *Who Reads Them Now?*, in which various faded literary figures were reassessed to see if they had anything to offer to the modern reader (not much in most cases). Mark remembering a feature on Thomas Hood called *So Much Comic, So Much Blood* which Charles had written some years previously, had rung and asked if there was anyone he'd like to re-assess. The Paris diary being as unsullied by bookings as usual and his long-running hare and hounds race with the tax man reaching a point where the latter was no longer going to be fobbed off with any scraps of paper other than banknotes, he assented, mentioning, off the top of his head, Swinburne, whose work he had not glanced at since leaving Oxford nearly thirty years before.

He had enjoyed researching and writing the programme. It was a long time since he had become involved in a project. And, after the strains of recording, he felt distantly confident that it had worked. A little enthusiasm insinuated itself into his mind. There was something there. Why shouldn't he turn it into a one-man stage show, as he had with *So Much Comic, So Much Blood*? Why shouldn't he write more for radio? The basic money really wasn't bad, and always a good chance of repeats. It was just a question of getting himself organised.

Simultaneous with this thought arrived what most frequently prevented him from getting himself organised. Mark handed it over. 'Cheers. Thanks for doing the programme. I think it really worked.'

Charles drank gratefully. 'Hope so.'

'No, I felt satisfied with it. All seemed to fit. Came out of the studio feeling we'd really made a programme. Don't often get that. The Beeb puts out so much rubbish these days.'

‘I have to confess I don’t listen much.’ It was true. For a moment, Charles wondered why. The radio would be an ideal companion for those (increasingly frequent) days when he just mooched round his bedsitter. And yet it was hardly ever switched on. Maybe he didn’t want to be distracted from his mooching.

‘Radio Three and Four are okay, I suppose, rapidly going downhill, though. But it’s Radio One and Two that are really awful.’ Mark gave the little pause of someone about to swing a leg over his hobbyhorse. ‘Yuk, “Nation shall speak piss unto nation”.’

Charles smiled politely at this distortion of the BBC’s motto, which Mark obviously kept polished in a little box for dinner parties, in the way his father might have kept pearl shirt studs. It was strange seeing Mark after all these years. Charles had forgotten the anti-establishment pose. Or at least, it had used to be a pose; now it seemed to have hardened into something beyond cynical phrase-making. But how old must Mark be now? Thirty-seven, thirty-eight? Perhaps he saw himself trapped, fully wound up, and pointed on an unswerving course towards his pension. In the old days he had always been complaining about the amount of dead wood at the top of the BBC; now perhaps he was feeling incipient Dutch Elm Disease himself. In the old days he had said he would never stay in the BBC. Only a couple of years, anyway. And then . . .

‘Of course, I’m not going to stay,’ Mark went on. ‘As I say, today was good, but most of the time I’m producing totally predictable rubbish. I can’t think when I was last surprised by anything I did. No, I’ll get my own thing going, I don’t know, I’ll . . .’

He returned to his drink. Maybe he could have finished the sentence, but Charles had a feeling that there was nothing more to add. Mark only wanted the negative benefit of escape; he had no positive thoughts of where he could escape to.

Time to move the conversation on to a less morbid plane. ‘How are the wife and kids?’

‘Oh, they’re fine, fine.’ Mark Lear’s mind was elsewhere. His eyes kept scanning the swirl of heads. Looking for someone specific? Or just looking. Yes, there was quite a lot of talent around. Another piece of Charles’s memory of Mark fell into place. He’d always had a roving eye.

The eyes roved on as he continued, ‘Vinnie is as ever, you know, full of good works, and the children are – well, you’ve had children . . .’

‘One.’

‘That’s enough to know that they are alternately tiresome and endearing. And always present. You must come and see us soon. We’re only up in Chalk Farm.’ The invitation was given automatically, without expectation of acceptance. ‘You haven’t gone back to Frances, have you?’

‘I see her sometimes.’ Charles didn’t want to be reminded of his own marriage. Not that he hated his wife. Far from it. He was probably as near to loving her as anyone else. But when they lived together, they bickered and things didn’t work. And he stumbled into affairs and . . .

When it was all working, when he was secure of Frances’s love in the background and he had some nice beddable little actress in the foreground, it seemed an ideal relationship. But the balance was rarely achieved. Recently, beddable little actresses had become rare enough to qualify as an endangered species. And Frances, who had just been appointed headmistress of the school where she taught, had developed a new career dynamism, which seemed to leave little time for an intermittent husband. Charles felt ruffled, fifty-one and failing.

He tipped his drink back, so that the ice clunked down on to his lips. ‘Another of those?’ he pointed at Mark’s dry white wine. ‘You haven’t got to rush away?’

‘Oh no.’ The Producer grinned with primary-school slyness. ‘I told Vinnie the studio was booked till ten. Since it’s now twenty past six, that gives me a bit of time.’

Charles edged his way to the bar, elbow to the fore, wishing, not for the first time, that the human body had been built to a more triangular design. He achieved base camp of one elbow in a pool of beer, and immediately assumed his customary cloak of invisibility. Maybe the barmen really couldn't see him. Or maybe part of their induction into the mysteries of the BBC was rigorous training in recognising and ignoring people without grades and staff numbers.

A tall man in a brown corduroy bomber jacket appeared at his shoulder, immediately drawing the barman's eye. 'Yes, Dave, what can I get you?'

Charles turned to remonstrate, or rather, being English, turned to debate inwardly whether or not to remonstrate, but, fortunately, the man behind was a gentleman. 'I think you were ahead of me,' he said with a well-crowned smile.

The voice was clear and professional, with an overtone of some accent. Scottish? American? But it carried authority. The barman grudgingly supplied Charles's drinks, still resolutely ignoring his presence. 'Saw you on the telly last night, Dave. On the quiz show.'

'Oh yes. *Owzat*? Hope you liked it.'

'Certainly did, Dave. Thought it was very funny. So did the wife. Is it going well, Dave?'

'Pretty good reaction, I think. They seem happy with the ratings. Happy enough to book another series, anyway.'

'Good for you, Dave. Oh, you'll be leaving the radio soon, won't you?'

'No chance, no chance. Radio's where I belong.'

'I hope you're right, Dave. The wife'd certainly miss your *Late Night Show* if it came off. She loves that *Ten for a Tune* competition.'

'No danger of me going – unless the Beeb decides they've had enough of me.'

'Wouldn't worry about that, Dave. Now what can I be getting you?'

Charles saw that he had his drinks and change. The latter had been deposited in a little pool of Guinness. The barman didn't believe in handing money to people who were invisible.

The man called Dave gave his order. 'Perrier water for me – I have to work tonight. And what about it, girls?'

He turned to two women, hooked on either arm of a short man in a sleek toupée. 'Riesling please, Dave,' said the older one, pronouncing it 'Reisling'. Her inclusion in the appellation 'girls' was generous. She was a middle-aged lady of pleasant dumpiness, with long hair of a redness unavailable on the colour chart offered by God.

'Right you are, Nita,' said the man called Dave. 'And for you?' He turned to the second girl with a charm that almost disguised his ignorance of her name.

This one was much more a girl, a shapely little wisp in a cream crochet dress. 'Well, I'll –'

'No, I don't think we'd better have another,' interposed her thatched escort in a strong American accent. 'We're just about to go out to eat.'

'Right you are, Michael.'

'Then we'll come along and see the show go out. Would you like that?'

The girl giggled and said she would. 'As the guy's agent I don't get many perks, but at least I can organise that,' said the American with a laugh. 'And who knows, maybe I can twist his arm, to place you a request. Even get you the Dave Sheridan Bouquet.'

'Ooh.' The girl squirmed.

Charles shielded his cargo of drinks back to Mark, negotiating the rare stepping-stones of carpet through a maelstrom of handbags, briefcases and legs. Mark, predictably, was talking to a girl.

She was short, probably not more than five foot three, and dark. Centre-parted black hair, well cut, framed an olive face dominated by enormous brown eyes. Once you saw the eyes, you didn't notice the rest of her. Charles was vaguely aware of a boyish body in trim cord trousers and Guernsey sweater, but he was mesmerised by the eyes.

She was talking animatedly as he approached. 'But come on, of course it's a political issue. No education is apolitical. None of it's pure information; there's always some dressing-up, some emphasis . . .' She broke off and looked enquiringly at Mark.

'This is Charles Paris. Charles – Steve Kennett.'

'Hello.'

'Steve works in News. *The World Tonight*, that sort of thing.'

'What do you do on it?'

'Produce.'

'Ah.' Hardly looked old enough to listen to the programme, let alone produce it.

She didn't seem inclined to pick up her previous polemic, so Mark explained Charles's part in the feature on Swinburne.

'Algernon Charles,' she said.

'That's the one.'

She wrinkled her nose. 'The only thing I remember about him was he was into flagellation, wasn't he?'

Charles smiled. 'He certainly had a fascination for the relationship between pain and pleasure.'

Mark recited,

*'I would find grievous ways to have thee slain,
Intense device and superflux of pain;
Vex thee with amorous agonies, and shake
Life at thy lips and leave it there to ache.'*

Good sado-masochistic stuff, isn't it?'

Charles was surprised by this sudden long quotation, until he realised that Mark was simply showing off. The resonant declamation was part of a cock-dance for the girl's benefit. Unaccountably, he felt a little twinge of jealousy.

But Steve didn't react to any sexual message there may have been in the quotation. 'Is sadomasochism an okay subject for Radio Four these days? I can never remember whether we're in the middle of a new permissiveness or a Reithian Puritan backlash – it changes from day to day.'

'Doesn't worry me,' Mark replied. 'We're on Radio Three. There is no smut on Radio Three – by definition. As soon as it's there it becomes Art. Anyway, we're Further Education. Anything goes in it's in a proper educational context.'

'Or if it's on *Woman's Hour*,' added Steve. 'They can get away with murder.'

'Murder.' Mark smiled. 'I heard rather a good line the other day – if there was a murder in the BBC, who do you think would have done it?'

'No idea.'

'The Executive Producer.'

'Why?'

'Well, he must have done *something*.' They laughed. Mark pointed to Steve's glass. 'What's that – lager?'

‘Yes, but only if you’re getting one.’

‘Certainly I am. Charles and I are going to get resolutely and gloriously pissed tonight.’

‘You mean you’re not going to the Features Action Group Meeting?’

‘What?’

‘You hadn’t forgotten? John Christie’s thing. Today’s Thursday.’

‘Oh shit.’

‘You had forgotten.’

‘Yes. Oh, Charles, I’m sorry, it had completely slipped my mind. I’ve got to go to this meeting.’

‘Don’t worry about it.’ Charles was still determined to spend the evening drinking, and he fe

confident he could find other companions. There’s always someone to drink with in the BBC club.

‘Oh shit,’ said Mark again. He looked at his watch. ‘At seven, isn’t it? Well, if I’ve got to s
through that, I’m certainly going to need another drink.’ He dived back into the crowd.

Charles raised a questioning eyebrow to Steve, who smiled and began apologetically, ‘It’s ver
BBC. You probably wouldn’t understand it. The fact is, in the great glorious past of radio, back in th
days when people actually listened to it, there was a department called the Features Departmen
which produced various landmarks in sound like *Steel* and *Under Milk Wood* and other forgotte
masterpieces. It was full of various brilliant producers, who, so far as one can tell, spent most of the
time drinking in the George and arguing about whose sports jacket Dylan Thomas had puked ov
most often.

‘Well, like all good things, the department declined and, some time – in the early Sixties it was –
was disbanded. Since then, whenever anyone feels frustrated about the sort of work they are doing
about the general quality of radio programmes, they say, “Why don’t we start up the Featur
Department again?” As if the clock could be turned back, the invention of television could be ignore
and England could once again become a nation of nice middle-class families sipping mugs of Ovaltin
round the beaming bakelite of their wirelasses.’

‘I see.’

‘The latest in the long line of people to use this rallying-cry is that gentleman over there –’ S
indicated a man in his mid-thirties, dressed in pin-striped suit, bright silk tie and complacent smil
‘His name’s John Christie. He’s a BBC career politician.’

‘I don’t really know what you mean by that.’

‘He is destined for some sort of greatness in the misty upper reaches of Management. His career h
been textbook. Out of Oxbridge straight into the African service – I believe he speaks fluent Swahi
though I’m not quite sure when he gets an opportunity to use it. Then he went to Belfast and work
over there in some administrative capacity . . .’

‘And that’s good, is it?’

‘Oh yes, lots of Brownie points for going to Belfast. The BBC doesn’t forget its loyal servants wh
risk getting blown up in the cause of regional broadcasting. His reward was a post created in Dram
Department. Co-ordinator, I think he’s called. Co-ordinator, Drama Department. CDD. The BBC love
initials. But from there he’s destined for greatness. Great greatness.’

‘What, you mean he’ll become editor of some programme or –’

‘Good Lord, no. You are naive. The top jobs in the BBC don’t have anything to do with the makin
of programmes. No, he’ll end up as Chief Sales Inhibitor for BBC Publications or in some strange an
powerful department like Secretariat.’

‘What do they do there?’

‘God knows.’

‘You sound pretty cynical about the whole thing; I take it you are not involved in the meeting.’

‘By no means. I’ll be there.’ The huge brown eyes looked levelly into his. Even if he could have broken the stare, he didn’t think he would have wanted to.

The interruption came from a third party. A blonde girl came up and threw her arms around Steve. She was only a little over average height, but looked huge beside the other. ‘Steve, look at me – still standing up.’

She carried a fairly empty wine glass and seemed in a state of high excitement. ‘Have you managed to get any sleep, love?’ asked Steve, with a trace of anxiety.

‘No, I’m held together by alcohol and willpower and sheer animal high spirits.’ The way she spoke suggested alcohol might be the dominant partner in the combination.

‘Can’t you get out of tonight?’

‘No, I’ll be fine.’

Steve remembered Charles. ‘I’m so sorry. This is Charles Paris. Andrea Gower. She shares a flat with me. Just come back from a week’s holiday in New York.’

Andrea giggled. ‘Just back in time for the Wimbledon finals. And I’m still somewhere up on cloud over the Atlantic.’

‘Didn’t you sleep on the flight?’

‘Not a wink. I had a drink and another drink and then the movie and then another drink.’

‘You should have got out of today’s work,’ said Steve, ‘caught up on some sleep.’

‘No, I’ll do that tomorrow. It’s my own fault. I stayed the extra day.’

Steve explained. ‘She was due back yesterday to start work today. But she decided to stay on.’

‘Ah, it was very important. I was finding out some very interesting things. I had to stay. It was necessary to the cause of investigative journalism.’ She stumbled over the last two words. ‘I have found something eminently worthy of investigation.’

‘Are you a journalist?’ asked Charles.

‘No, just a humble SM. Today an SM – tomorrow ruler of the world or dead in the attempt.’ She dropped into an accent for the last phrase. Charles revised his earlier opinion that she was drunk. She had had a few drinks, but her excitement was more emotional.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t speak BBC. What’s an SM?’

‘Studio Manager. Knob-twiddler, teacup-rattler, editor, tape-machine starter and what you will.’

‘Ah. So what does that mean in practical terms? I mean, what have you done today?’

‘Today? God, what day is it? Today started about forty hours ago with pancakes and bacon in a coffee shop on a very hot Lexington Avenue . . . But, coming up to date, having been met at Heathrow by my good friend, Miss Stephanie Kennett, I rushed to Maida Vale to record a music session for the famous Dave Sheridan.’

‘Should I know him?’

‘What, you mean you don’t know the famous disc jockey? Him, over there – with Nita Lawson she’s his Executive Producer.’ She pointed to the tall man who had deferred to Charles at the bar. ‘The session was the usual Radio Two treacle – I say . . .’ A new thought struck her. ‘If you haven’t heard of Dave Sheridan, can it be that you are a lover of real music? Real classical music?’

‘Sorry. I’m afraid I’m not very musical at all.’

‘Oh, never mind. It’s just that in these degenerate days, lovers of real music have got to stick together. And fight the barbarian hordes who play Simon and Pumpnickel into the wee small hours of the morning.’ She grimaced at Steve, who said ‘Simon and Garfunkel’ with automatic amusement. It was evidently an old joke between them.

‘Anyway, where was I?’ Andrea was so wound up that nothing could stop her flow. ‘Yes, right, that was the music session, at which would you believe the great man Dave Sheridan actually put in a appearance. So we exchanged badinage. Then, after the session, I hopped into a taxi – which I can claim because I was carrying tapes and they can be wiped by travelling on the Underground – took them up to the Library and here I am. This evening I have to record – would you believe – a European Cup soccer match. It’s not even my group. Someone’s sick in the other lot and I’m on standby. The match is broadcast live from Munich at nine o’clock and I have to sit in a channel and record it. How long do soccer matches last?’

‘I don’t know. An hour and a half maybe.’

‘Ugh. So, if I don’t drop dead beforehand, half-past ten will see me staggering into a cab, telling the driver to take me to Paddington, taking a Mogadon and falling into bed for about a fortnight.’

‘I’m sure you could get someone else to record this match for you,’ Steve remonstrated. ‘You look dead on your feet. Alick’d do it, I’m sure, if he’s free.’

‘I am booked for it,’ said Andrea stubbornly, ‘and I’ll do it. I can do anything at the moment. I’m on an incredible high.’

‘So it seems,’ said Charles.

‘Just try not to be around when the low comes.’

Andrea’s ebullience was momentarily curbed by the appearance of Mark with the drinks.

‘I’m sorry I took so long. I was talking to John Christie and . . . Oh, hello.’

Neither Mark nor Andrea seemed to be exactly pleased to see each other. ‘How was your trip?’ he asked after a pause.

‘Fine. Smashing.’

‘Good.’

‘Yes, it was. Very good. Made me completely rethink my life, what I’m going to do.’

‘Good.’

‘I am going to unearth the truth. I think the truth’s very important. Everyone should know the truth. There was a pause. She swayed slightly with exhaustion. Then she grabbed Steve’s hand and said ‘Come on, Roger and Prue are over there.’

Steve muttered an apologetic ‘Goodbye’ to Charles as the two girls disappeared into the crowd.

Mark studiously didn’t comment on their departure. ‘Look, I’ve just been talking with John Christie and he wants you to join this committee.’

‘What committee?’

‘This Features Action thing.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘You see, the thing about it is, John doesn’t want it to be just BBC staff. Thinks we’re in danger of getting too insular. Says we should involve creative people from outside too. Well, Helmut Winkler had got Reggie Morris set up – do you know him? – he did that big feature on Nietzsche which was nominated for the Italia Prize.’

‘No.’

‘It was called *Zarathustra Meets Übermensch* . . .’

‘Still no. In fact, even more no.’

‘Anyway, Reggie’s suddenly rung through to say he can’t make it – pissed, I imagine – so we haven’t got anyone representing the writing end of Drama features. So I told John about the smashing job you’d done on Swinburne and he said, Great, you’d be ideal.’

One decision Charles had taken very early in life, in fact while still at school when he had been

electd on to the committee of the Drama Society, was that he would never again be on any committee for anything. Committees he knew to be time-wasting, long-winded, inconclusive and mind-blowingly boring. One of few advantages of his footloose life as an actor was that he did not have to take part in regimentation of that sort. Committees should be left to that unaccountable group of people who actually enjoyed them.

So he started to make his excuses, but was interrupted by the arrival of the pin-striped suit which had been identified as John Christie. 'Charles Paris, I'm delighted you're going to be with us,' he said with the unctuous charm of a Tory MP opening a garden fête.

'Yes, well you see, the thing is . . .'

'John, shall I get a couple of bottles to take over? I mean we can have a drink at this job, can't we?'

'Of course, Mark, of course. I do want this to be totally informal. Not BBC at all. In fact I've organised a few bottles of the old Sans Fil over there.'

'Oh great. If we run out, I can come back for more. Come along, Charles. The meeting's over in Bill's. In John's office on the Sixth Floor.'

So Charles went along. As he caught up with Mark, he asked, 'What's the old Sans Fil?'

'BBC Club wine. It's French for "wireless".'

CHAPTER TWO

‘SO WHAT WE are saying is, okay, stuff Management. Let’s forget all the old prescribed answers and see what we can come up with by just gathering a few of the real creators together. Let’s think laterally. Are we going to do better by sticking with the current *ad hoc* way of making occasional features or by starting a department formed just for that purpose?’

As John Christie concluded his opening address, Charles was again struck by the political image. The candidate was still opening the *fête*, smiling at everyone, on everyone’s side, concerned about everyone’s minor ailments, defending everyone against Them and obscuring in a welter of solicitude his own identity with Them.

An earnest thin-faced young man picked up the gauntlet. ‘The point is that in the current climate none of us has any time to make features – certainly not in News. We’re too busy producing the day-to-day programmes. If we ever got any thinking time, I’m sure we could come up with the goods.’

‘Exactly,’ said John Christie, though Charles felt he would have said that whatever opinion had been expressed. ‘That is why we have here a representative selection of creative programme-makers to find out how that sort of time can be made.’

‘Huh,’ objected a girl with a grubby T-shirt and Shredded Wheat hair, ‘you call it representative but I notice there are only four women here.’

John Christie opened his hands in what was meant to be a disarming shrug. ‘Sorry, love. When I said “representative”, I didn’t mean representative of society as a whole; I just meant representative creative programme-makers within the BBC.’

That didn’t go down any better. ‘I see, you are saying that men are more creative than women.’

‘No, I didn’t mean . . .’

‘Come to that,’ objected a young man with wild eyes, beard and teeth, ‘I don’t see many black people here. Or gays.’

‘Who’s counting?’ came a limp voice from down the table.

‘No, but there should be some blacks. I mean, we live in a multi-racial society.’

‘Yes,’ said Mark Lear, ‘but we work in the BBC, where, as we all know, our concession to a multi-racial Britain is one coloured newsreader, a doorman and half the canteen staff.’

The line came out rather crudely. Obviously it had been meant as a joke, and Charles wondered whether Mark was drunk. He had a vague memory from their previous acquaintance that Mark didn’t hold his liquor well.

John Christie dispensed unctiousness on to the ruffling waters of the meeting. ‘Now come on, we’re on at the stage of preliminary discussion. I’m sure when we get into more detailed work, we can decide what is the optimum composition of our work-force. This is just an exploratory meeting.’

The objectors shrugged back into their chairs with Well-don’t-say-I-didn’t-warn-you expressions and the chairman continued, ‘Let’s try as far as possible to keep the discussion to features and how they are best made. Don’t let’s get side-tracked. Any thoughts?’

‘I think we’re doing features already. We always have been on *Woman’s Hour*; just don’t give them fancy titles.’ This was from a lady of a certain age and a less certain shape. ‘I mean the programme we did recently on hysterectomy was a feature by anyone’s definition.’

‘Yes, yes, I’m sure. But the point at issue is whether that sort of programme would be improved by having more time and resources available for its production.’

‘I suppose it might be a bit better, but on the whole things that just have to happen come out best. At least that’s what we find on *Woman’s Hour*. All that’s needed to create good features is creative writers and producers. This moaning about lack of resources and time just sounds to me like bad workmen blaming their tools.’

The girl in the T-shirt wasn’t standing for that. ‘Even the most brilliant workperson in the world needs some sort of tools to play with.’

‘I didn’t know workpersons had tools; I know workmen do,’ came a facetious murmur from Charles’s right. They had been introduced before the meeting started. Nick Monckton, Lig Entertainment. It seemed that everyone present felt obliged to slip into his or her departmental stereotype. Nick felt it his duty to supply the jokes.

The girl either didn’t hear or chose not to hear the interpolation. ‘And by tools, I mean not only time and money, but also co-operation and encouragement from above. I mean, I came up with the great idea for three one-hour features on force-feeding the suffragettes, and HSP(R) had the nerve to say he didn’t think it fitted into a course on Parliamentary Democracy.’

Charles appealed silently to Mark and received the whispered gloss, ‘Head of Schools Programme (Radio).’

‘I got the same reaction to my Buddhism in the London suburbs idea,’ objected someone. ‘I CAMP turned it down.’

‘Same thing with my radiophonic *Crucifixion in Space*. Both CR4 and CR3 were frightened of it.’
‘Well, the Gogol musical idea got up as far as DPR. HDR just didn’t understand it, basically. I think at one stage DPR was going to refer it to MDR, but AHDR reckoned that would be publically questioning HDR’s decision, so sweet F.A. happened.’

Charles was beginning to feel he had somehow drifted into a game of Etruscan Scrabble and was relieved when John Christie once again chaired them into silence. ‘Look, I know we’ve all got lots to say, but let’s try and keep it one at a time, shall we? And I do think it important that we keep the discussion as general as possible. I mean, I’m sure you’ve all got pet projects which would fall in the features category – indeed, I hope you all have, because that means that I’ve invited the right people – but let’s try to keep off individual and departmental hobbyhorses for the time being. Let’s just try to think how it would all work out in an ideal world.’

‘In an ideal world we wouldn’t work for the BBC,’ said Mark Lear with surprising savagery. But the rest of the meeting took it as a joke.

A small man with a large moustache came in over the laughter. ‘I think, I hope, that is, pardon me but, speaking for a moment with my regional hat on, I think there is a danger that we are all going to forget the important creative resources we have in the regions. I don’t know that we’ve all met, but I am, to those of you to whom I am unknown, not to put too fine a point on it, Harry Bassett from Leeds and I do, er, hope that, when the chips are down, we won’t ignore the veritable mines of talent which we have been, as it were, mining for some time in Leeds and the other regional centres, that is, in an discussion we are having to which what I’m saying might be of relevance, if you take my point. And I’m not just harking back to the days of E. A. Harding and Geoffrey Bridson in Manchester or Cecil McGivern from Newcastle. I’m talking about the, as it were, here and now.’

‘I mean, no one’s denigrating the fine work done in London, but I think, in a sense, it always seems to me, speaking off the record, that London is only one of many centres of creative radio and there’s an all-too-ready tendency to dismiss the regional contribution as something that is not, in any real sense, as it were, of great importance. I mean, we may be, in a manner of speaking, out of town, but we’re by no means and not in any sense, out of ideas, if you take my point.’

It was apparent from the impatient expressions of the rest of the meeting that they did all regard the regional contribution as completely irrelevant, but John Christie, salting away votes for some future election, smiled charmingly and said, ‘Yes, of course, Harry. I’m very glad you brought that point up. But perhaps we ought to start, before we get too deeply embroiled in production details, with the artists involved in the creation of feature programmes. I thought it very important, for this meeting, that we should spread our net wider than just BBC staff. There’s a dangerous tendency for us to regard what happens here as something on its own, totally divorced from the general world of the arts. So I’m very pleased to have with us some writers and performers whose opinion on the true creative issues will, I think, be invaluable to all of us. We are lucky to have with us the composer – dare I say *avant garde* composer? – Seth Hurt and –’

‘I don’t really regard myself as part of any movement, *avant garde* or –’

‘No, well, I don’t think it’s necessary to get bogged down in definitions. What I was –’

‘Definition, and particularly self-definition, is very important to me as an artist. I regard the music I write as unique and I rather resent being bunched into some blanket category with a lot of self-indulgent experimenters, who –’

‘Yes, well I’m sorry to have got you wrong there, but if I could just move on, we’re delighted to have with us Dave Sheridan, who, I’m sure, will excuse me for describing him as at the more popular end of the artistic spectrum . . .’ The disc jockey inclined his head graciously. ‘. . . But I do think it is important that we don’t lose touch with popular culture. We also have Ian Scobie, whose work as presenter and interviewer in the news field I am sure you all know, and the famous actor, playwright and great specialist in the poetry feature world . . .’ He glanced at his notes. ‘. . . Charles Paris.’

Charles looked at the floor to avoid seeing them all mouthing, ‘Who?’

‘So I think it might be very instructive if we were to hear from some of them as to how, as artists who might be employed by the BBC, they would best like to see feature projects set up.’

Charles continued his scrutiny of the carpet tiles. The only thing he had to say was that he thought he probably shouldn’t be there and was there any chance of one of the wine bottles being passed in his direction as his glass was empty.

But, fortunately, Dave Sheridan willingly took up the challenge. ‘I think, speaking as a kind of outsider, who has worked in a great variety of different styles of radio all over the world, there is an excellence in BBC programming which is unrivalled, and this –’

‘Oh, but there’s a lot of shit too,’ observed Seth Hurt, who, despite his unwillingness to be categorised, Charles had already pigeon-holed as a repellent little tick.

Dave Sheridan rode the interruption with dignity. ‘If I may finish. Sorry, I have to go off in a moment to pre-record the opening of tonight’s show, so I must be brief. The point I was coming to was that features are a wonderful way of bridging traditional gaps between popular and more esoteric forms of culture and I would hope . . .’

He continued to develop his theme with skill and coherence. There was a lot more to him than the public stereotype of a disc jockey. Beside him, Nita Lawson’s head nodded to reinforce his point, occasionally murmuring, ‘Right on, Dave’. But Charles found his mind wandering. He shouldn’t have come. He knew that all he had wanted for that evening was to get drunk, and yet somehow here he was stuck in the spiralling tedium of a committee meeting in whose subject he had no interest at all. To compound his gloom, he saw the feminist up the table trickle the last of the wine into her glass. Good God, how long would this thing go on? Already an hour and a half had passed and they still seemed to be waffling round preliminary remarks. Surely they’d stop before the pubs shut.

He contemplated just getting up and leaving. After all, he didn’t know any of them and he wasn’t

going to be of any use to them if he stayed. Maybe he could leave as if to go to the Gents and forget come back . . .

‘. . . and maybe you have something to add, Charles?’

He looked up to see John Christie and the rest of the meeting focused on him. Dave Sheridan had finished his peroration and gone off to pre-record the opening of that night’s show. Charles had been chosen as the next creative contributor.

‘Um, er, well,’ he said, like an art dealer valuing a Rembrandt. Then, reaching the appropriate price, ‘No, I don’t think I do have anything to add’. In case that didn’t carry conviction, he added darkly ‘Not at this moment,’ implying, he hoped, esoteric suspicions as to the authenticity of the Rembrandt in question.

‘There are a couple of things I’d like to add to what Dave said, if I may.’ The speaker was Nita Lawson. ‘You see, Dave’s talking about music, because that’s the scene he’s into, but I think whatever your bag, features could still be where it’s at, creative-wise, because it’s a matter of vibes . . .’

The meeting continued relentlessly, but not forwards; its course was a tedious sequence of meanders and eddies, with every advance of common sense choked in tangles of inter-departmental jealousy. Moment by moment, Charles wanted to leave more, and then didn’t have the nerve just to get up and walk out, and then suffered self-recrimination for his gutlessness.

A possible relief came when Mark finally suggested going over to the club to buy more wine. Charles welcomed the prospect of accompanying him. Once there, he could down a couple of large Bell’s while deciding whether to return to the meeting or not. But when he made the offer, Mark said ‘Oh no, I can manage,’ and left before there was time to argue.

Shortly after this diversion, John Christie himself had to leave the room briefly. He had been summoned by a phone call from the duty office; some crisis had arisen over a play that was being broadcast that evening.

His departure relaxed the mood, and people started talking in little groups. Charles grinned across at Steve Kennett and received the rich gift of a smile from her huge eyes. He supposed the mouth must have smiled too, but it was difficult to disengage the eyes and look. He hoped there would be time later to have another drink with Miss Kennett.

He glanced at his watch. Nearly nine. Maybe the meeting would just disband naturally after the partial break-up. He had a horrible feeling it wouldn’t though. Of course there was nothing to stop him from walking out . . . But he felt vaguely that he should at least say goodbye to Mark. And then there was any chance of seeing Steve afterwards . . .

Sheridan returned and sat down beside Nita.

‘Opening safely in the can, Dave?’

‘Yes, sure thing.’

‘Is Kelly there?’

‘Just checking through the running order.’

‘Good. All all right?’

‘Just fine.’

‘I’m sorry, Dave. Won’t be able to drop into the studio tonight. Got to leave by ten to get the late train out to Watford.’

‘Don’t you worry, my love. You do quite enough looking after my interests in the office all day without fussing about me at night.’

‘I’ll switch on when I get home. Hear the last half-hour.’

‘Ah, what devotion.’

At that moment conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a new figure. The door burst open with such a bang that everyone turned towards it and, once there, their attention was held by the eccentric appearance of the newcomer.

The first impression was of Lewis Carroll’s White Knight. A middle-aged man with the same affronted mane of white hair and pale lugubrious face. Spotted cavalry twill trousers and a grubby linen jacket also seemed drained of pigment. And, as the White Knight’s horse had been cluttered with pots and pans and other impedimenta, so his facsimile seemed to be sprouting belongings in every direction. His arms were full of files and tape boxes, while from his pockets sheaves of paper and streamers of tape and coloured leader spilled in carnival disarray.

To compound the surrealism of his appearance, when the man spoke, it was with the thick German accent of a mad professor from a comedy sketch. ‘Mein Gott, yen vill ye haf tape editorz in ze organization viz any sensitivity to ze English langvidge?’

His words were greeted by a ripple of affectionate laughter, which did not seem to worry him, and he subsided into a chair in a shower of belongings, like a building being demolished.

Charles raised inquisitive eyebrows to Nick Monckton, who, in Mark’s absence, was proving sympathetic interpreter.

‘Helmut Winkler,’ came the whisper back. ‘Reputedly one of the greatest intellects in the BBC. And incidentally a complete loony.’

The little man next to whom Winkler had sat, earlier identified by John Christie as ‘Ronnie Barrow’, a tower of strength from the Studio Managers Department, who’s here to advise us on matters technical and to keep the minutes of the meeting’, took issue with the newcomer. ‘Now, Helmut, you can’t just make allegations like that. Are you complaining of inefficiency on the part of one of the SMs?’

‘Inefficiency, no. I did not say inefficiency; I said insensitivity. Yes, ze girl iss as efficient as a washing machine – and viz ze same amount off imagination.’

‘Well, listen, if you want to make a formal complaint, then you have to –’

But that particular argument was curtailed by the return of John Christie’s bland smile. Soon after Mark Lear came back loaded with bottles of Sans Fil. His flushed expression suggested that he had stoked up with a couple of drinks at the bar while making his purchase. Still, Charles’s jealousy soon passed when he had a full glass in front of him and he felt more able to endure the wash of irrelevance that eddied about him.

He sank into a reverie. Not his customary depressed brooding, but mildly cheerful visions. There was still a glow from the Swinburne recording and a pleasing irony in his presence at the meeting. He was amused, content.

Anyway, the proceedings were drawing to a close. One or two people had had to leave. David Sheridan had gone off again at about half-past nine, because he was on the air at ten. A couple of others had snuck away, mumbling about trains to catch. Charles himself could have left easily, but he felt now he might as well stick it out. So long as they broke up by ten or soon after, there would still be time for a couple of drinks in the club.

The committee had already reached the conclusion that certain aspects of the features problem should be discussed in smaller units or sub-committees and possible dates for the next full meeting were mooted. Everyone got out diaries, which they scanned importantly, searching for elusive gaps

their work schedules. Charles didn't have a diary; the dynamism of his career rarely gave rise to the need for one.

'. . . and then, Charles, you and your sub-committee should be able to get together before that date and report back to us all. Okay?'

He looked up blankly into John Christie's inquiring eyes. 'Um, yes, possibly,' he said, pricing the second Rembrandt. And then, remembering his views on committees and their baleful offspring, sub-committees, he added, 'What I didn't quite get clear was who else was going to be on the sub-committee.'

John Christie didn't rate him for not paying attention, but urbanely supplied the list of names: 'Nick Monckton, Harry Bassett, Ronnie Barron and Steve Kennett.'

'Ah, yes, of course.' There were quite a few things he would like to be on with Steve Kennett and until such time as they became possible, a subcommittee was a good start.

'Okay then? Next Wednesday all right for you?'

'Um, er, yes.'

'If you sort out the venue between yourselves.'

'Sure.' Charles feared it would stretch his credibility as a Rembrandt assessor if he asked what the sub-committee was meant to be discussing.

The meeting broke up. Mark Lear said, 'See you over the road. I'll sign you in. Large Bell's, is it?' and vanished before Charles could reply.

The other contributors moved off in slow groups, some still talking animatedly. John Christie beamed in the doorway, a vicar congratulating himself on the holiness of his congregation.

To Charles's relief, Steve Kennett approached him. 'I can ring the others at work, but I haven't got your number.'

'Ah, it's -'

'Or, on the other hand, we can fix where the meeting is now.'

'Fine.'

'We'll have it round at my flat. Be a relief to get off BBC premises. She gave him an address near Paddington. 'About eight, I should think.'

'Fine.'

'Not that I think we're likely to get far with the topic.'

'No.' Charles smiled. 'Well, it's that kind of topic,' he observed, masking his ignorance. 'Are you going over to the club for a drink?'

'Why not? I'll just pop in on Andrea in the channel and see if her wretched football match is over.'

'I'll tag along. I haven't worked out the geography of this building.'

The editing channel on the floor below was a small greenish room with sound-proofing fabric panels on the walls. But the thick door was open when Steve Kennett screamed and the sound rang along the corridor.

Charles rushed to the doorway and peered over her shoulder at the scene inside.

Andrea Gower was sitting on a tall chair in front of a green tape recorder as big as a fridge. But her head lolled backwards and her arms hung limp at her sides. Her skin was as white as the polystyrene coffee cup on top of the machine.

Next to the cup two razor blades were upended in a slot by the editing block. From them dripped rivulets of blood like spilled cooking ran down the front of the tape machine.

And from gashes in her wrists as neat as cuts in fabric, darkening blood had flowed down her limbs.

hands to the floor. The carpet tiles, designedly dull in colour so as not to show coffee stains, could not subdue the red deposit that had seeped into them. But the blood had ceased to drip; she had been dead for some while.

The football match was still on. The ten-inch metal spools on the tape deck turned inexorably, while the commentator and crowd in Munich screamed and sighed at the thwarted climaxes of the game.

‘Oh, my God,’ said Steve Kennett. ‘Do you remember what she said? “I’m on an incredible high. Just try not to be around when the low comes.”’

CHAPTER THREE

AS THE TAXI approached Mark Lear's house, Charles remembered another detail about the producer which had slipped his mind – he had married money. Vinnie's father had been a wine shipper, sold out of his interest just before his death, and left his beloved daughter extremely well-heeled. The house on Haverstock Hill was considerably more splendid than the average BBC producer's salary could buy. Anyone less embarrassed than Mark about his unearned wealth would have given his postal address as Hampstead, rather than Chalk Farm.

There were just the three of them – Mark, Charles and Nick Monckton, the young Liggett Entertainment producer. He lived nearby in Belsize Park and had said he would drop in for a quick drink. Charles also felt in need of one. He hadn't made it to the club. By the time the Duty Officer had been summoned and called the BBC Head of Security, who had reluctantly called the police, it had been long past closing time. Mark had come back into Broadcasting House to look for him and then he heard the news of Andrea's death. He took it badly.

So it was about half past twelve when they got back. Mark's sitting room was smartly furnished with a couple of tables and a desk of real value. What must have been Vinnie's family silver was arrayed in a glass-fronted dresser. The carpet was plush and the wood highly polished. Mark's contribution to the decor, an irregular shelf of records, a row of paperbacks loitering on top of the piano and a defiant poster of Lenin, seemed self-conscious and impermanent. Vinnie dictated what the room should look like, and her cleaning lady ensured that it kept its high polish, both literal and metaphorical.

Mark didn't speak as he went across to the well stocked silver drinks tray. He looked too large for the room, very bull-in-a-china-shop in his jeans and the dark blue donkey jacket he had not yet taken off. There was a calculated incongruity: the gritty student thrust into the stately home, Jimmy Portman visiting the in-laws.

And yet even as the impression came, Charles knew it was illusory. The donkey jacket wasn't a real donkey jacket, but a well-cut coat in donkey-jacket style from a Hampstead boutique. And the jeans weren't worker's jeans, but expensively aged denim trousers, finished with curlicues of yellow stitching.

The image of social gaucherie was no more than an image, a reflection of Mark's anti-BBC pose. He might rail against the values of the class in which he found himself, but he was no more likely to leave the comfort of his home than he was the job he affected to despise. A studied nonconformity of dress, Labour stickers in the window at election time, a shrugging shift of blame to Vinnie whenever his children's private education came up, and Mark could live with himself.

Besides, Charles recalled, the whole act of the deprived orphan fingering the velvet curtains of the big house was a nonsense. Mark's parents, though not as wealthy as Vinnie's, had been comfortably middle class and, though it was rarely mentioned, he had been through public school and Cambridge.

He poured them all large measures of whisky in cut-glass tumblers, threw his donkey jacket with unnecessary untidiness on to the green velvet sofa, and slumped into a matching armchair. 'What's the toast?' he asked brutally. 'Absent friends?'

Nick Monckton took a drink and shook his head. 'I don't know. Jesus, though . . . Poor kid.' The last comment was a bit patronising, since he must have been three or four years younger than the dead girl.

'Did you know her well?' asked Mark.

‘Saw her a bit. Occasional parties. She did a few shows for me, and editing, of course. She was the Radio Two group, so I only saw her when Light Ent. were short. Didn’t know her very well really. How about you?’

‘Much the same. The odd editing session . . . you know.’ Charles, having witnessed his encounter with Andrea in the club, felt that Mark was telling less than he might have done.

‘How is it,’ he asked, ‘– explain it to me simply, because I don’t understand the workings of the BBC – that if she specialised in Radio Two music, she was recording a football match tonight?’

‘The other group just got stuck,’ said Mark. ‘Needed someone to help out, and she got lumbered.’ He saw Charles looking at him and added defensively, ‘She told me in the club earlier this evening.’

‘It’s happening more and more,’ complained Nick Monckton. ‘It’s impossible to get the same SM for a series. And as for booking studios . . .’

He continued and Mark joined in the BBC-gripping vigorously, finding comparable instances of Further Education. Rather too vigorously, Charles thought. The hurried explanation hadn’t fooled him. He had witnessed their meeting in the club and knew Andrea hadn’t mentioned her football recording in Mark’s hearing. Perhaps there were other ways he could find out about it, schedules he could consult, but it seemed strange that he should show that amount of interest. Alternatively, he might have spoken to Andrea at some other point during the day. Though, if she had only arrived at Heathrow at lunchtime and gone straight to a music session at Maida Vale . . . Either way, confirmed the impression that Mark had known the girl rather better than he implied.

Nick Monckton was leaving. ‘Starting rehearsal at half-past nine in the morning.’

‘What are you doing?’

‘It’s a sit. com. called *Dad’s the Word*.’

‘Fun?’

‘Well, some of it’s sort of all right.’ He didn’t sound very convinced. ‘I mean, we suffer from doing lunchtime recordings, you know, just get an audience of old biddies, and the scripts are . . . well, not that great . . . But it’s okay.’

‘You make it sound terrific,’ Charles observed.

‘Usual BBC tat,’ said Mark automatically. ‘Whatever happened to radio comedy?’

‘It is getting better, actually.’ Nick looked quite earnest. ‘There are a lot of young producers and a better atmosphere for getting new ideas away, Mark. Really.’

‘Not like the old days.’

‘I’m going to go before someone mentions Tony Hancock.’ Nick Monckton stood up. ‘Thanks very much for the drink, Mark. No doubt see you around. And, Charles, nice to have met you. We’ll meet again on this sub-committee, anyway, or somewhere else . . .’

‘Maybe.’

‘I mean, you’re an actor and I’m a producer.’ He didn’t sound very convinced about the second part of the definition. ‘Do you do comedy?’

The question came as something of a shock. ‘Yes, I suppose so. I mean, I have done. Even did a job last year as feed to the late, great Lenny Barber. I mean, I’m an actor. Most of us do most things. Can say we can and only reveal we can’t after the contract’s been signed.’

‘Oh well, maybe I’ll be in touch.’ It was spoken casually, but its intended showbiz condescension was weakened by furious blushing.

‘My God, how old is he?’ Charles asked after the young man had gone.

‘About eleven, I should think. No, I suppose he’s twenty-four, something like that. A product of Light Ent.’s conviction that everyone who sang comic songs for the Cambridge Footlights or did a

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