

John Mortimer

Rumpole Rests His Case



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Rumpole Rests His Case

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-*Bookpage*

RUMPOLE RESTS HIS CASE

John Mortimer is the author of three Rumpole novels and thirteen Rumpole collections, many which formed the basis for the PBS TV series *Rumpole of the Bailey*. His work also includes many novels and plays and three acclaimed volumes of autobiography. A former barrister, Mortimer, who was knighted in 1998, lived in Oxfordshire, England. He died in January of 2009.

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John Mortimer

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For Ann Mallalieu and Tim Cassel

Rumpole and the Old Familiar Faces

In the varied ups and downs, the thrills and spills in the life of an Old Bailey hack, one thing stands stone. Your ex-customers will never want to see you again. Even if you've steered them through the rocks of the prosecution case and brought them out to the calm waters of a not-guilty verdict, they won't plan further meetings, host reunion dinners or even send you a card on your birthday. If they catch a glimpse of you on the Underground, or across a crowded wine bar, they will bury their faces behind their newspapers or look studiously in the opposite direction.

This is understandable. Days in Court probably represent a period of time they'd rather forget and as a rule, I'm not especially keen to renew an old acquaintance when a face I once saw in the Old Bailey Dock reappears at a 'Scales of Justice' dinner or the Inns of Court garden party. Reminiscences of the past are best avoided and what is required is a quick look and a quiet turn away. There have been times, however, when recognizing a face seen in trouble has greatly assisted me in the solution of some legal problem, and carried me to triumph in a difficult case. Such occasions have been rare, but like number thirteen buses, two of them turned up in short order round a Christmas which I remember as being one of the oddest, but certainly the most rewarding, I ever spent.

'A traditional British pantomime. There's nothing to beat it!'

'You go to the pantomime, Rumpole?' Claude Erskine-Brown asked with unexpected interest.

'I did when I was a boy. It made a lasting impression on me.'

'Pantomime?' The American Judge who was our fellow guest round the Erskine-Brown dinner table was clearly a stranger to such delights. 'Is that some kind of mime show? Lot of feeling imaginary walls and no one saying anything?'

'Not at all. You take some good old story, like Robin Hood.'

'Robin Hood's the star?'

'Well, yes. He's played by some strapping girl who slaps her thighs and says lines like "Cheer up Babes in the Wood, Robin's not far away".'

'You mean there's cross-dressing?' The American visitor was puzzled.

'Well, if you want to call it that. And Robin's mother is played by a red-nosed comic.'

'A female comic?'

'No. A male one.'

'It sounds sexually interesting. We have clubs for that sort of thing in Pittsburgh.'

'There's nothing sexual about it,' I assured him. 'The dame's a comic character who gets the audience singing.'

'Singing?'

‘The words come down on a sort of giant song-sheet,’ I explained. ‘And she, who is really a he, gets the audience to sing along.’

Emboldened by Erskine-Brown’s claret (smoother on the tongue but with less of a kick than the Chateau Thames Embankment), I broke into a stanza of the song I was introduced to by Robin Hood’s masculine mother.

‘I may be just a nipper,
But I’ve always loved a kipper...
And so does my loving wife.
If you’ve got a girl just slip her
A loving golden kipper
And she’ll be yours for life.’

‘Is that all?’ The transatlantic Judge still seemed puzzled.

‘All I can remember.’

‘I think you’re wrong, Mr Rumpole.’

‘What?’

‘I think you’re wrong and those lines do indeed have some sexual significance.’ And the Judge fell silent, contemplating the unusual acts suggested.

‘I see they’re doing *Aladdin* at the Tufnell Park Empire. Do you think the twins might enjoy it, Mr Rumpole?’

The speaker was Mrs Justice Erskine-Brown (Phillida Trant as she was in happier days when she was called her the Portia of our Chambers), still possessed of a beauty that would break the hearts of the toughest prosecutors and make old lags swoon with lust even as she passed a stiff custodial sentence. The twins she spoke of were Tristan and Isolde, so named by her opera-loving husband Claude, who was now bending Hilda’s ear on the subject of Covent Garden’s latest Ring cycle.

‘I think the twins would adore it. Just the thing to cure the Wagnerian death-wish and bring them into a world of sanity.’

‘Sanity?’ The visiting Judge sounded doubtful. ‘With old guys dressed up as mothers?’

‘I promise you, they’ll love every minute of it.’ And then I made another promise that sounded reasonable even as I spoke the words. ‘I know I would. I’ll take them myself.’

‘Thank you, Rumpole.’ Phillida spoke in her gentlest judicial voice, but I knew my fate was sealed. ‘We’ll keep you to that.’

‘It’ll have to be after Christmas,’ Hilda said. ‘We’ve been invited up to Norfolk for the holiday.’

As she said the word ‘Norfolk’, a cold, sneeping wind seemed to cut through the central heating of the Erskine-Browns’ Islington dining-room and I felt a warning shiver.

I have no rooted objection to Christmas Day, but I must say it’s an occasion when time tends to hang particularly heavily on the hands. From the early-morning alarm call of carols piping on Radio Four

the closing headlines and a restless, liverish sleep, the day can seem as long as a fraud on the Po
Office tried before Mr Injustice Graves.

It takes less than no time for me to unwrap the tie which I will seldom wear, and for Hilda to receive the annual bottle of lavender water which she lays down rather than puts to immediate use. The highlights after that are the Queen's speech, when I lay bets with myself as to whether Hilda will stand to attention when the television plays the National Anthem, and the thawed-out Safeway's birch followed by port (an annual gift from my faithful solicitor, Bonny Bernard) and pudding. I suppose what I have against Christmas Day is that the Courts are all shut and no one is being tried for anything.

That Christmas, Hilda had decided on a complete change of routine. She announced it in a circuitous fashion by saying, one late November evening, 'I was at school with Poppy Longstaff.'

'What's that got to do with it?' I knew the answer to this question, of course. Hilda's old school had this in common with polar expeditions, natural disasters and the last war: those who have lived through it are bound together for life and can always call on each other for mutual assistance.

'Poppy's Eric is Rector of Coldsands. And for some reason or other he seems to want to meet you at Rumpole.'

'Meet me?'

'That's what she said.'

'So does that mean I have to spend Christmas in the Arctic Circle and miss our festivities?'

'It's not the Arctic Circle. It's Norfolk, Rumpole. And our festivities aren't all that festive. So, yes, you have to go.' It was a judgment from which there was no possible appeal.

My first impression of Coldsands was of a gaunt church tower, presumably of great age, pointing an accusing finger to heaven from a cluster of houses on the edge of a sullen, gun-metal sea. My second was one of intense cold. As soon as we got out of the taxi, we were slapped around the face by a wind which must have started in freezing Siberia and gained nothing in the way of warmth on its journey across the plains of Europe.

'In the bleak mid-winter/ Frosty winds made moan...' wrote that sad old darling, Christina Rossetti. Frosty winds had made considerable moan round the Rectory at Coldsands, owing to the doors that stopped about an inch short of the stone floors and the windows which never shut properly, causing the curtains to billow like the sails of a ship at sea.

We were greeted cheerfully by Poppy. Hilda's friend had one of those round, childish pretty faces often seen on seriously fat women, and she seemed to keep going on incessant cups of hot, sweet tea and a number of cardigans. If she moved like an enormous tent, her husband Eric was a slender wraith of a man with a high aquiline nose, two flapping wings of grey hair on the sides of his face and a vague air of perpetual anxiety, broken now and then by high and unexpected laughter. He made cruciform gestures, as though remembering the rubric 'Spectacles, testicles, wallet and watch' and forgetting where these important articles were kept.

‘Eric,’ his wife explained, ‘is having terrible trouble with the church tower.’

‘Oh dear.’ Hilda shot me a look of stern disapproval, which I knew meant that it would be more polite if I abandoned my overcoat while tea was being served. ‘How worrying for you, Eric.’

The Rev. Eric went into a long, excited and high-pitched speech. The gist of this was that the tower, although of rare beauty, had not been much restored since the Saxons built it and the Normans added the finishing touches. Fifty thousand pounds was needed for essential repairs, and the thermometer erected for the appeal outside the church, was stuck at a low hundred and twenty, the result of an emergency jumble sale.

‘You particularly wanted Horace to come this Christmas?’ Hilda asked the Man of God with the air of someone anxious to solve a baffling mystery. ‘I wonder why that was.’

‘Yes. I wonder!’ Eric looked startled. ‘I wonder why on earth I wanted to ask Horace. I don’t believe he’s got fifty thousand smackers in his back pocket!’ At this, he shook with laughter.

‘There,’ I told him, ‘your lack of faith is entirely justified.’ I wasn’t exactly enjoying Coldsand Rectory, but I was a little miffed that the Reverend couldn’t remember why he’d asked me there in the first place.

‘We had hoped that Donald Compton would help us out,’ Poppy told us. ‘I mean, he wouldn’t notice fifty thousand. But he took exception to what Eric said at the Remembrance Day service.’

‘Armistice Day in the village,’ Eric’s grey wings of hair trembled as he nodded in delighted affirmation, ‘and I prayed for dead German soldiers. It seemed only fair.’

‘Fair perhaps, darling. But hardly tactful,’ his wife told him. ‘Donald Compton thought it was distinctly unpatriotic. He’s bought the Old Manor House,’ she explained to Hilda. From then on the conversation turned exclusively to this Compton and was carried on in the tones of awe and muted wonder in which people always talk about the very rich. Compton, it seemed, after a difficult start in England, had gone to Canada where, during a ten-year stay, he laid the foundations of his fortune. His much younger wife was quite charming, probably Canadian, and not in the least stand-offish. He had built the village hall, the cricket pavilion and a tennis court for the school. Only Eric’s unfortunate sympathy for the German dead had caused his bounty to stop short at the church tower.

‘I’ve done hours of hard knee work,’ the Rector told us, ‘begging the Lord to soften Mr Compton’s heart towards our tower. No result so far, I fear.’

Apart from this one lapse, the charming Donald Compton seemed to be the perfect English squire and country gent. I would see him in church on Christmas morning, and we had also been invited for drinks before lunch at the Manor. The Reverend Eric and the smiling Poppy made it sound as though the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury would be out with the carol singers and we’d been invited to drop in for high tea at Windsor Castle. I also prayed for a yule log blazing at the Manor so that we could, in the true spirit of Christmas, thaw out gradually.

‘Now, as a sign of Christmas fellowship, will you all stand and shake hands with those in front and behind you?’ Eric, in full canonicals, standing on the steps in front of the altar, made the suggestion.

though he had just thought of the idea. I stood reluctantly. I had found myself a place in church near a huge, friendly, gently humming, occasionally belching radiator and I was clinging to it and stroking it as though it were a new-found mistress (not that I have much experience of new-, or even old-four mistresses). The man who turned to me from the front row seemed to be equally reluctant. He was, Hilda had pointed out excitedly, the great Donald Compton in person: a man of middle height with silver hair, dressed in a tweed suit and with a tan which it must have been expensive to preserve Christmas. He had soft brown eyes which looked, almost at once, away from me as, with a touch of his dry fingers, he was gone and I was left for the rest of the service with no more than a well-tailored back and the sound of an uncertain tenor voice joining in the hymns.

I turned to the row behind to shake hands with an elderly woman who had madness in her eyes and whispered conspiratorially to me, 'You cold, dear? Like to borrow my gloves? We're used to a bit of chill weather round these parts.' I declined politely and went back to hugging the radiator, and as I did so a sort of happiness stole over me. To start with, the church was beautiful, with a high timbered roof and walls of weathered stone, peppered with marble tributes to dead inhabitants of the manor. It was decorated with holly and mistletoe, a tree glowed and there were candles over a crib. I thought how many generations of Coldsands villagers, their eyes bright and faces flushed with the wind, had belted out the hymns. I also thought how depressed the great Donald Compton — who had put on little gold half-glasses to read the prophecy from Isaiah: 'For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called "Wonderful" — would feel Jesus's instruction to sell all and give it to the poor should ever be taken literally.

And then I wondered why it was that, as he touched my fingers and turned away, I felt that I had lived through that precise moment before.

There was, in fact, a huge log fire crackling and throwing a dancing light on the marble floor of the circular entrance hall, with its great staircase leading up into private shadows. The cream of Coldsands was being entertained to champagne and canapes by the new Lord of the Manor. The decibels rose as the champagne went down and the little group began to sound like an army of tourists in the Sistine Chapel, noisy, excited and wonderstruck.

'They must be all his ancestors.' Hilda was looking at the pictures and, in particular, at a general in a scarlet coat on a horse prancing in front of some distant battle.

My mouth was full of cream cheese enveloped in smoked salmon. I swallowed it and said, 'Oh, shouldn't think so. After all, he only bought the house recently.'

'But I expect he brought his family portraits here from somewhere else.'

'You mean, he had them under the bed in his old bachelor flat in Wimbledon and now he's hung them round an acre or two of walls?'

'Do try and be serious, Rumpole, you're not nearly as funny as you think you are. Just look at the family resemblance. I'm absolutely certain that all of these are old Comptons.'

And it was when she said that that I remembered everything perfectly clearly.

He was with his wife. She was wearing a black velvet dress and had long, golden hair that sparkled in the firelight. They were talking to a bald, pink-faced man and his short and dumpy wife, and they were all laughing. Compton's laughter stopped as he saw me coming towards him. He said, 'I don't think we've met.'

'Yes,' I replied. 'We shook hands briefly in church this morning. My name's Rumpole and I'm staying with the Long-staffs. But didn't we meet somewhere else?'

'Good old Eric! We have our differences, of course, but he's a saintly man. This is my wife Lorelei and Colonel and Maudy Jacobs. I expect you'd like to see the library, wouldn't you, Rumpole? I'm sure you're interested in ancient history. Will you all excuse us?'

It was two words from Hilda that had done it: 'old' and 'Compton'. I knew then what I should have remembered when we touched hands in the pews, that Old Compton is a street in Soho, and that was perhaps why Riccardo (known as Dicko) Perducci had adopted the name. And I had received that very same handshake, a slight touch and a quick turn away when I said goodbye to him in the cells under the Old Bailey and left him to start seven years for blackmail. The trial had ended, I now remembered just before a long-distant Christmas.

The Perducci territory had been, in those days, not rolling Norfolk acres but a number of Soho street clubs and clip joints. Girls would stand in front of these last-named resorts and beckon the lonely, the desperate and the unwary in. Sometimes they would escape after paying twenty pounds for a water-cocktail. Unlucky, affluent and important customers might even get sex, carefully recorded by microphones and cameras to produce material which was used for systematic and highly profitable blackmail. The victim in Dicko's case was an obscure and not much loved Circus Judge; so it was regarded as particularly serious by the prosecuting authority.

When I mitigated for Dicko, I stressed the lack of direct evidence against him. He was a shadowy figure who kept himself well in the background and was known as a legend rather than a familiar face round Soho. 'That only shows what a big wheel he was,' Judge Bullingham, who was unfortunately trying the case, bellowed unsympathetically. In desperation I tried the approach of Christmas on him. 'Crimes forgiven, sins remitted, mercy triumphant, such was the message of the story that began in Bethlehem,' I told the Court, at which the Mad Bull snorted that, as far as he could remember, the story ended in a criminal trial and a stiff sentence on at least one thief.

'I suppose something like this was going to happen sooner or later.' We were standing in the library, in front of a comforting fire and among leather-bound books, which I strongly suspected had been bought by the yard. The new, like the old, Dicko was soft-eyed, quietly spoken, almost unnaturally calm; the perfect man behind the scenes of a blackmailing operation or a country estate.

'Not necessarily,' I told him. 'It's just that my wife has so many old school friends and Poppy Longstaff is one of them. Well now, you seem to have done pretty well for yourself. Solid citizens still misconducting themselves round Old Compton Street, are they?'

'I wouldn't know. I gave all that up and went into the property business.'

'Really? Where did you do that? Canada?'

'I never saw Canada.' He shook his head. 'Garwick Prison. Up-and-coming area in the Home'

Counties. The screws there were ready and willing to do the deals on the outside. I paid the embarrassingly small commissions.'

'How long were you there?'

'Four years. By the time I came out I'd got my first million.'

'Well, then I did you a good turn, losing your case. A bit of luck His Honour Judge Bullingham didn't believe in the remission of sins.'

'You think I got what I deserved?'

I stretched my hands to the fire. I could hear the cocktail chatter from the marble hall of the eighteenth-century manor. 'Treat every man according to his deserts and who shall escape whipping' I quoted *Hamlet* at him.

'Then I can trust you, Rumpole? The Lord Chancellor's going to put me on the local Bench.'

'The Lord Chancellor lives in a world of his own.'

'You don't think I'd do well as a magistrate?'

'I suppose you'd speak from personal experience of crime. And have some respect for the quality of mercy.'

'I've got no time for that, Rumpole.' His voice became quieter but harder, the brown eyes lost the softness: that, I thought, was how he must have looked when one of his clip-joint girls was caught with the punters' cash stuffed in her tights. 'It's about time we cracked down on crime. Well now, can you trust you not to go out there and spread the word about the last time we met?'

'That depends.'

'On what?'

'How well you have understood the Christmas message.'

'Which is?'

'Perhaps, generosity.'

'I see. So you want your bung?'

'Oh, not me, Dicko. I've been paid, inadequately, by Legal Aid. But there's an impoverished church tower in urgent need of resuscitation.'

'That Eric Longstaff, our Rector - he's not a patriot!'

'And are you?'

'I do a good deal of work locally for the British Legion.'

'And I'm sure, next Poppy Day, they'll appreciate what you've done for the church tower.'

He looked at me for a long minute in silence, and I thought that if this scene had been taking place in a back room in Soho there might, quite soon, have been the flash of a knife. Instead, his hand went to an inside pocket, but it produced nothing more lethal than a cheque book.

'While you're in a giving mood,' I said, 'the Rectory's in desperate need of central heating.'

‘This is bloody blackmail!’ Dicko Perducci, now known as Donald Compton, said.

‘Well,’ I told him, ‘you should know.’

Christmas was over. The year turned, stirred itself and opened its eyes on a bleak January. Crimes were committed, arrests were made and the courtrooms were filled, once again, with the sound of argument. I went down to the Old Bailey on a trifling matter of fixing the date of a trial before Mr Justice Erskine-Brown. As I was leaving, the usher came and told me that the Judge wanted to see me in her private room on a matter of urgency.

Such summonses always fill me with apprehension and a vague feeling of guilt. What had I done? Got the date of the trial hopelessly muddled? Addressed the Court with my trousers carelessly unzipped? I was relieved when the learned Phillida greeted me warmly and even offered me a glass of sherry, poured from her own personal decanter. ‘It was so kind of you to offer, Rumpole,’ she said unexpectedly.

‘Offer what?’ I was puzzled.

‘You told us how much you adored the traditional British pantomime.’

‘So I did.’ For a happy moment I imagined Her Ladyship as Principal Boy, her shapely legs encased in black tights, her neat little wig slightly askew, slapping her thigh and calling out, in bell-like tones, ‘Cheer up, Rumpole, Portia’s not far away.’

‘The twins are looking forward to it enormously.’

‘Looking forward to what?’

‘*Aladdin* at the Tufnell Park Empire. I’ve got the tickets for the nineteenth of Jan. You do remember promising to take them, don’t you?’

‘Well, of course.’ What else might I have said after the fifth glass of the Erskine-Brown Sherry Emillion? ‘I’d love to be of the party. And will old Claude be buying us a dinner afterwards?’

‘I really don’t think you should go round calling people “old”, Rumpole.’ Phillida now looked annoyed, and I downed the sherry before she took it into her head to deprive me of it. ‘Claude’s got the tickets for Pavarotti. *L’Elisir d’Amore*. You might buy the children a burger after the show. Oh, and it’s not far from us on the Tube. It really was sweet of you to invite them.’

At which she smiled at me and refilled my glass in a way which made it clear she was not prepared to hear further argument.

It all turned out better than I could have hoped. Tristan and Isolde, unlike their Wagnerian namesakes, were cheerful, reasonably polite and seemed only too anxious to dissociate themselves, as far as possible, from the old fart who was escorting them. At every available opportunity they would touch

me for cash and then scamper off to buy ice cream, chocolates, sandwiches or Sprite. I was left reasonable peace to enjoy the performance.

And enjoy it I did. Aladdin was a personable young woman with an upturned nose, a voice which could have been used to wake up patients coming round from their anaesthetics, and memorable thighs. Uncle Abanazer was played, Isolde told me, by an actor known as a social worker with domestic problems in a long-running television series. Wishy and Washy did sing to electric guitar (deafeningly amplified) but Widow Twankey, played by a certain Jim Diamond, was all a Dame should be, a nimble little cockney, fitted up with a sizeable false bosom, a flaming red wig, sweeping eyelashes and scarlet lips. Never have I heard the immortal line, 'Where's that naughty boy Aladdin got to?' better delivered. I joined in loudly (Tristan and Isolde sat silent and embarrassed) when the Widow and Aladdin conducted us in the singing of 'Please Don't Pinch My Tomatoes'. It was, in fact, and in fairness, all a traditional pantomime should be, and yet I had a vague feeling that something was wrong, an element was missing. But, as the cast came down a white staircase in glittering costumes to enthusiastic applause, it seemed the sort of pantomime I'd grown up with, and which Tristan and Isolde should be content to inherit.

After so much excitement I felt in need of a stiff brandy and soda, but the eatery the children had selected for their evening's entertainment had apparently gone teetotal and alcohol was not on the menu. Once they were confronted by their mammoth burgers and fries I made my excuses, said I'd be back in a moment, and slipped into the nearby pub which was, I noticed, opposite the stage door of the Empire.

As the life-giving draught was being poured I found myself standing next to Washy and Uncle Abanazer, now out of costume, who were discussing Jim the Dame. 'Very unfriendly tonight,' Washy said. 'Locked himself in his dressing-room before the show and won't join us for a drink.'

'Perhaps he's had a bust-up with Molly?'

'Unlikely. Molly and Jim never had a cross word.'

'Lucky she's never found out he's been polishing Aladdin's wonderful lamp,' Abanazer said, and they both laughed.

And as I asked the girl behind the bar to refill my glass, in which the tide had sunk to a dangerously low, I heard them laugh again about the Widow Twankey's voluminous bosom. 'Strapped-on polystyrene,' Abanazer was saying. 'Almost bruises me when I dance with her. Funny thing, tonight was quite soft.'

'Perhaps she borrowed one from a blow-up woman?' Washy was laughing as I gulped my brandy and legged it back to the hamburgers. In the dark passage outside the stage door I saw a small, nimble figure in hurried retreat: Jim Diamond, who for some reason hadn't wanted to join the boys at the bar.

After I had restored the children to the Erskine-Browns' au pair, I sat in the Tube on my way back to Gloucester Road and read the programme. Jim Diamond, it seemed, had started his life in industry before taking up show business. He had a busy career in clubs and turned down appearances on television. ' "I only enjoy the living show," Jim says. "I want to have the audience where I can see them."' His photograph, without the exaggerated female make-up, showed a pale, thin-nosed, in some way disagreeable little man with a lip curled either in scorn or triumph. I wondered how such an unfriendly-looking character could become an ebullient and warm-hearted widow. Stripped of his

make-up, there was something about this comic's unsmiling face which brought back memories of another meeting in totally different circumstances. It was the second time within a few weeks that I had found an old familiar face cast in a new and unexpected part.

The idea, the memory I couldn't quite grasp, preyed on my mind until I was tucked up in bed. The play as Hilda's latest historical romance dropped from her weary fingers, when she turned her back on me and switched out the light, I saw the face again quite clearly but in a different setting. Not Diamond not Sparkler, but Sparksman, a logical progression. Widow Twankey had been played by Harry Sparksman, a man who trained as a professional entertainer, if my memory was correct, not in clubs but in Her Majesty's prisons. It was, it seemed, an interesting career change, but I thought no more of it at the time and, once satisfied with my identification, I fell asleep.

'The boy couldn't have done it, Mr Rumpole. Not a complicated bloody great job to that extent. His only way of getting at a safe was to dig it out of the wall and remove it bodily. He did that in Barkingside boutique and what he found in it hardly covered the petrol. Young Denis couldn't have got into the Croydon supermarket peter. No one in our family could.'

Uncle Fred, the experienced and cautious head of the Timson clan, had no regard for the safe-breaking talent of Denis, his nephew and, on the whole, an unskilled recruit in the Timson enterprise. The Croydon supermarket job had been highly complicated and expertly carried out and had yielded to its perpetrators, thousands of pounds. Peanuts Molloy was arrested as one of the lookouts, after falling and twisting an ankle when chased by a night watchman during the getaway. He said he didn't know any of the skilled operators who had engaged him, except Denis Timson who, he alleged, was in general charge of the operation. Denis alone silenced the burglar alarm and deftly penetrated the lock on the safe with an oxyacetylene blowtorch.

It had to be remembered, though, that the clan Molloy had been sworn enemies of the Timson family from time immemorial. Peanuts' story sounded implausible when I met Denis Timson in the Brixton Prison interview room. A puzzled twenty-five-year-old with a shaven head and a poor attempt at a moustache, he seemed more upset by his Uncle Fred's low opinion of him than the danger of conviction and subsequent prolonged absence from the family.

Denis's case was to come up for committal at the South London Magistrates' Court before 'Skinny' Simpson, whose lack of success at the Bar had driven him to a job as a stipendiary beak. His nickname had been earned by the fact that he had not, within living memory, been known to splash out on a round of drinks in Pommeroy's Wine Bar.

In the usual course of events, there is no future in fighting proceedings which are only there to commit the customer to trial. I had resolved to attend solely to pour a little well-deserved contempt on the evidence of Peanuts Molloy. As I started to prepare the case, I made a note of the date of the Croydon supermarket break-in. As soon as I had done so, I consulted my diary. I turned the virgin pages as yet unstained by notes of trials, ideas for cross-examinations, splodges of tea or spilled glasses of Pommeroy's Very Ordinary. It was as I had thought. While some virtuoso was at work on the Croydon safe, I was enjoying *Aladdin* in the company of Tristan and Isolde.

‘Detective Inspector Grimble. Would you agree that whoever blew the safe in the Croydon supermarket did an extraordinarily skilful job?’

‘Mr Rumpole, are we meant to congratulate your client on his professional skill?’

God moves in a mysterious way, and it wasn’t Skimpy Simpson’s fault that he was born with thick lips and a voice which sounded like the rusty hinge of a rusty gate swinging in the wind. I decided to ignore him and concentrate on a friendly chat with D. I. Grimble, a large, comfortable, ginger-haired officer. We had lived together, over the years, with the clan Timson and their mis-doings. He was known to them as a decent and fair-minded cop, as disapproving of the younger, Panda-racing, evidence-massaging intake to the Force as they were of the lack of discretion and criminal skill which marked the younger Timsons.

‘I mean the thieves were well informed. They knew that there would be a week’s money in the safe.’

‘They knew that, yes.’

‘And was there a complex burglar-alarm system? You couldn’t put it out of action simply by cutting the wires, could you?’

‘Cutting the wires would have set it off.’

‘So putting the burglar alarm out of action would have required special skills?’

‘It would have done.’

‘Putting it out of action also stopped a clock in the office. So we know that occurred at eight-forty-five?’

‘We know that. Yes.’

‘And at nine-twenty young Molloy was caught as he fell, running to a getaway car.’

‘That is so.’

‘So this heavy safe was burnt open in a little over half an hour?’

‘I fail to see the relevance of that, Mr Rumpole.’ Skimpy was getting restless.

‘I’m sure the officer does. That shows a very high degree of technical skill, doesn’t it, Detective Inspector?’

‘I’d agree with that.’

‘Exercised by a highly experienced peterman?’

‘Who is this Mr Peterman?’ Skimpy was puzzled. ‘We haven’t heard of him before.’

‘Not Mr Peterman.’ I marvelled at the ignorance of the basic facts of life displayed by the magistrate. ‘A man expert at blowing safes, known to the trade as “peters”,’ I told him and turned back to D. I. Grimble. ‘So we’re agreed that this was a highly expert piece of work?’

‘It must have been done by someone who knew his job pretty well. Yes.’

‘Denis Timson’s record shows convictions for shoplifting, bag-snatching and stealing a radio from an unlocked car. In all of these simple enterprises, he managed to get caught.’

‘Your client’s criminal record!’ Skimpy looked happy for the first time. ‘You’re allowing that to go into evidence, are you, Mr Rumpole?’

‘Certainly, Sir.’ I explained the obvious point. ‘Because there’s absolutely no indication he was capable of blowing a safe in record time, or silencing a complicated burglar-alarm, is there, Detective Inspector?’

‘No. There’s nothing to show anything like that in his record...’

‘Mr Rumpole,’ Skimpy was looking at the clock; was he in danger of missing his usual train back home to Haywards Heath? ‘Where’s all this heading?’

‘Back a good many years,’ I told him, ‘to the Sweet-Home Building Society job at Carshalton. When Harry Sparksman blew a safe so quietly that even the dogs slept through it.’

‘You were in that case, weren’t you, Mr Rumpole?’ Inspector Grimble was pleased to remember. ‘Sparksman got five years.’

‘Not one of your great successes.’ Skimpy was also delighted. ‘Perhaps you wasted the Court’s time with unnecessary questions. Have you anything else to ask this officer?’

‘Not till the Old Bailey, Sir. I may have thought of a few more by then.’

With great satisfaction, Skimpy committed Denis Timson, a minor villain who would have had difficulty changing a fuse, let alone blowing a safe, for trial at the Central Criminal Court.

‘Funny you mentioned Harry Sparksman. Do you know, the same thought occurred to me. An expert like him could’ve done that job in the time.’

‘Great minds think alike,’ I assured D. I. Grimble. We were washing away the memory of an hour or two before Skimpy with two pints of nourishing stout in the pub opposite the beak’s Court. ‘You know Harry took up a new career?’ I needn’t have asked the question. D. I. Grimble had a groupie’s encyclopaedic knowledge of the criminal stars.

‘Oh yes. Now a comic called Jim Diamond. Got up a concert party in the nick. Apparently gave him a taste for show business.’

‘I did hear,’ I took Grimble into my confidence, ‘that he made a come-back for the Croydon job.’ It had been a throwaway line from Uncle Fred Timson - ‘I heard talk they got Harry back out of retirement’ - but it was a thought worth examining.

‘I heard the same. So we did a bit of checking. But Sparksman, known as Diamond, has got a cast-iron alibi.’

‘Are you sure?’

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