

NEW BRIGHTON ROCK



An Inspector Vignoles Mystery

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NEW BRIGHTON ROCK

STEPHEN DONE



For Heather, Andrew and Richard.

~ AUTHOR'S NOTE ~

This story was inspired by the song *Die Moritat von Mackie Messer* (*The Ballad of Mack the Knife*) written by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht for *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*), which premiered in Berlin in 1928. A *moritat* (from *mori* meaning deadly and *tat* meaning deed) is a medieval version of a murder ballad performed by strolling minstrels. In *The Threepenny Opera* the moritat singer opens and closes the story, with a barrel organ accompaniment, with the tale of Mack the Knife, a character based on a fictional highwayman called Macheath in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, who was in turn based on a real life thief called Jack Sheppard. (The Brecht incarnation of the character was, however, far more cruel and sinister than Sheppard.) The translation of the lyric is my own, based on an amalgam of three English versions, in the hope of replicating the German as faithfully (if not as poetically) as possible.

Numerous books and articles proved useful in the creation of this book, notably the following titles from the *Liverpool Echo* nostalgia series: 'The Liverpool Overhead Railway', 'Great Mersey Shipping Lines,' 'River Mersey Gateway to the World' and 'New Brighton: Our Days Out Remembered.' *Wallasey Now & Then* by Irene Birch was also valuable, as it shows just how much has altered over the years.

New Brighton is a very different place today compared with 1951. It is currently enjoying a revival and it is good see the pretty town and its sandy beach packed with visitors again. Bidston station is still open for business, though a motorway junction and a large retail area lie close by. Those seeking Poulton & Liscard need to drive along the dual carriageway towards the Kingsway Tunnel (while taking note of the widened cutting). Everything has been swept away to replaced by a road. Likewise all remains of Seacombe and Birkenhead Woodside have vanished.

Surprisingly, Queen Berengaria — the wife of Richard the Lionheart — not only gave her name to a fabulous ocean cruiser and a GWR locomotive, but is also the wife of my fifth cousin 30x removed.

I wish to thank everyone who has helped and encouraged me along the way, especially my loyal readers, who send me delightful letters and emails. Sincere thanks go to Irena, for her love and support, to Bill for another splendid cover design and to Helena at Hastings Press for publishing the Inspector Vignoles series.

Stephen Done
New Brighton, Autumn 2013



An 'nem schönen blauen Sonntag
Liegt ein toter Mann am Strand
Und ein Mensch geht um die Ecke
Den man Mackie Messer nennt

*On a beautiful blue Sunday
Lies a dead man on the Strand
And a man goes around the corner
Whom they call Mack the Knife*

The Ballad of Mack the Knife by Kurt Weill & Bertolt Brecht

PROLOGUE

Jewish Cemetery, Liverpool

19th November 1946. It was mizzling. Not quite drizzle, but more a fine mist that lay on overcoats and umbrellas like a pale dusting of silver. It didn't soak or drench, but still sucked the heat from the body and made joints ache.

Detective Inspector Hopgood flexed his icy-cold fingers and looked through the archway with its top-heavy pediment towards the pale memorials with their curious Hebrew script being slowly dampened by this miserable precipitation. The gravestones marched in undulating rows towards a thin veil of misty dankness that huddled behind the perimeter wall and hung from the dark branches of brooding yews. The mist hunkered down as though gathering ready to sweep in like an invading army the moment the failing light flickered its last and died. He pulled his muffler tighter.

A lamplighter was pushing his little cart along Deane Road. The hissing gas mantles he had already lit, rather than spreading light and cheer, served only to accentuate the pervading sense of gloom that seeped between the black clothing of the mourners standing in hushed huddles. Hopgood pushed his hands deeper into the pockets of his overcoat and hunched his shoulders, rotating them backwards a few times in an attempt to massage some warmth into his muscles.

It had been perishing cold in Prince's Road Synagogue, and the service interminable. Hopgood was wondering why he was putting himself through this ordeal; it was not as though he knew the deceased nor was he friends with the living, but a sense of duty made it necessary to attend. Of course it was only in books and cheap 'B' films that the murderer returned to sit in a pew at the back, with 'guilty' as good as stamped on his forehead, ready to be nabbed by the dim-witted policemen; but even so, Hopgood wanted to see who came along to pay their respects. There just might be someone he'd not yet interviewed; that missing witness to throw him a lead, or perhaps the sister of the deceased might have remembered something she had so far failed to share with him.

Not that his sergeant held out much hope on that point. Detective Sergeant Stanhope was looking thoroughly woebegone, with a cigarette cupped discreetly in one hand held behind his back and a hangdog expression on his hard, rather ugly face, clearly even more convinced that being there was a futile exercise.

'Aw, come on guv, Mystic Marnie's mad as a blummin' hatter.' He'd made his thoughts clear when they'd talked in their office at Manchester Central station some hours earlier. Mystic Marnie was not her real name, and Hopgood preferred to stick to 'Miss Newman', considering her fairground name too flippant for his ears.

'She was the last person to see Peter Newman alive — discounting whoever took his life.'

'That's as maybe, guv, but she's not all there.' Stanhope tapped his forehead, making a sound disconcertingly like that of wood striking wood. Hopgood looked pained, but did not disagree. 'Look, even if we did get anything that made sense from the old bat,' Stanhope continued, 'the defence would drive an engine and its coaches right through it. She'll just forget everything or change her blummin' mind.' Hopgood blew the air from his lungs in a disconsolate manner, but remained silent. 'The jury won't like her, either. What with her being a you-know...' Stanhope winked and rolled his eyes.

Hopgood glared at him angrily. 'No, tell me sergeant — what is she?'

Stanhope flushed red. 'Aw, come on guv...'

'No, I want to hear it from you.'

'It's what all the lads are saying,' He looked uncomfortable. 'It's not just me that thinks it.'

'Thinks what? That she's a Jewess?'

'Well, there's that and all. Not that that makes any odds, of course,' he added hurriedly.

'It had better not, sergeant.' Hopgood gave him a fierce stare.

'I wasn't meaning anything. It's just that she's a bit...*unusual*. Not like other women, and, you know...'

'Oh, for crying out loud.' Hopgood stood up and paced around the office. 'Let me get this right. What you don't have the guts to say to my face is that you've decided she's a...' He hardly wanted to say it aloud. '...a lesbian. Well, am I right?'

'It is sort of obvious.'

'Is it? So you're an expert, are you? I do not recall the matter at any point being raised in the course of our enquiries, so why've you decided that, eh?' He was furious. 'Because she wears trousers? Has a funny accent? Shared a house with her brother and never married?' Hopgood pointed a finger at Stanhope, jabbing it towards the discomfited sergeant to emphasise each point. 'Or is it that she's not quite to your taste? Not some dizzy blonde to drool over?' Hopgood turned away, unwilling to

look at his sergeant's bright red face a moment longer. 'You and *the lads* make me sick.' He spun around and faced him again, his voice now calm and level, though no less menacing. 'Miss Newman is the victim's nearest and dearest and you will accord her the utmost courtesy. I'll be watching in case you put your size tens in it. Understood?'

'Yes, guv.'

The trouble was, Stanhope had a point; he just voiced it crudely. Miss Newman was an unpromising witness and, whilst the D.S. might have allowed his imagination too much free rein, like it or not, he was correct to appreciate that both judge and jury would struggle with her in the witness box. She was a Jewish fairground fortune-teller from Czechoslovakia and, frankly, a bit bonkers and yes, quite possibly a lesbian. You couldn't make it up if you tried.

Hopgood took a long, deep breath of dank air and tried not to feel disheartened. She couldn't make two sentences add up to the same thing twice, always infuriatingly switching subjects and timescales with consummate ease. Stanhope was right on that point; she changed her story so often he didn't know what to believe anymore, and that was before anyone mentioned the bloody barrel organ and her God-awful singing. It should not matter what someone did to earn a living, but this really took the biscuit. However, Miss Newman was still the best lead he had — the only lead he had.

'Put that out.' Hopgood nodded towards the cigarette smoke forming a thin grey line from behind the sergeant's back. 'We'll say a few words to her, then you can speak to that man at the back over there. I don't recognise him. You never know.'

'If she's any good at seeing into the future, why can't she just read the tarot cards and tell us who done it. It would save us a whole lot of bugging about,' observed Stanhope.

Miss Newman was born Zdenka Novakova, but she and her elder brother Peter had adopted the British version of their surname in a desire to be assimilated into their adopted country, soon after arriving at Newhaven in January 1939.

'My condolences, Miss Newman. It was a lovely service.'

'You are kind, but too polite.' She dropped one side of her mouth into a crooked grimace. 'You English never say what you think, huh?' Hopgood looked mortified. 'It was too long. And so damned cold. Typical Jews, eh? Not wasting a shekel on heating.' She gave a bitter, self-deprecating laugh, rich with the effects of strong cigarettes. Her accent was heavy, but she had mastered her new language well. As Stanhope

stifled a snigger, a Liverpool Corporation tram rattled past with a hard, metallic grumble and a flash of sparks from the electric wires, helping to mask the sound.

'I had not been in a synagogue before', Hopgood continued, 'It was surprisingly beautiful, and not as strange as I'd expected.' He coughed nervously. Why was he finding this so hard? It was as though he were walking on eggshells, tiptoeing around her Jewishness like an awkward youth meeting his girlfriend's parents for the first time. Perhaps it was all the ghastly revelations he'd been reading in the papers about the Nazi death camps that left him appalled and sickened, and perhaps even a little ashamed to be a gentile.

She gave a shrug of her narrow shoulders. 'It's a long way from Gartenside.' Hopgood noticed she pronounced the name of the lonely road in Leasowe on the Wirral (where the Newmans had shared a small and horribly damp bungalow) with a distinctly Germanic inflection. 'We did not come here so often. It is hard when you work long days and nights.'

'It is a decent turn out, all the same.' Hopgood indicated the twelve mourners. Unbidden, they had opened a way through as he and Stanhope approached Miss Newman before retreating to a discreet distance. Their faces were pale, one man clearly suffered from a cold, and a few eyes were red, especially those of two young women with too much make-up and an aura of sweet perfume. They looked as though they were from the fair, or were perhaps vaudeville entertainers in one of the theatre revues, judging by their shapely legs, tiny waists and hair pulled back severely into ponytails in a manner currently unfashionable. Miss Newman was from a similar background, so it would make sense. He noticed how they all looked uncomfortable and suspicious, frequently stealing glances but swiftly averting their gaze if he met their eyes. Nobody liked a policeman at a funeral.

'Are they all friends or work colleagues of Mr Newman?'

'They are good people. Why are you asking? They didn't kill my Peter. You must look somewhere else.'

'I did not mean to infer anything, Miss Newman.' Hopgood coughed apologetically. 'I am sure you would prefer not to remember that night.'

'Of course I want to remember!' Her outburst drew the attention of some of the mourners. Two taller men shifted their position as if preparing to step in and intervene. 'I will never forget it.' Miss Newman's voice cracked but her eyes burned like dark coals. 'I shall keep it forever

in my mind — how can you forget leaving your home?’ Hopgood narrowed his eyes and concentrated hard. Was she still talking about the same thing? ‘We left our house and never will see it again.’ She hugged her narrow chest, drawing her old army greatcoat closer. A pair of sparrow-thin legs in black slacks and patent leather shoes that shone like mirrors stuck out of the bottom of the coat in a faintly ludicrous manner, making her look like some kind of dark bird — a cormorant, perhaps. Hopgood noticed the many neat and beautifully-formed darns and patches in the fabric of her overcoat. Like everyone in these days of austerity, she must make life-expired clothes last well beyond their days. He knew all about that: he could feel a patch of cold dampness under his left foot where the sole of his shoe was paper thin, and was conscious that his only black suit was shiny and worn, and sagged at the backside.

Her hands quivered from the combination of emotional exhaustion and cold. ‘You have a cigarette? I need a smoke.’ She snapped her fingers at him.

‘Of course.’ He fumbled for a pack and decided it would be polite to join her. As he lit two cigarettes from one match, Stanhope watched, a slight upturn to his mouth as he stifled a smirk. Hopgood gave him a nod towards an unidentified man who had turned away as though to walk off. Stanhope touched the brim of his cheap homburg to excuse himself and followed him.

‘Is there anything more you can tell me about the night your brother was killed?’ asked Hopgood.

‘He was so pleased, because I made him soup. Parsnip soup. We grow them in our garden. You have a garden, inspector?’

‘Er, yes...I do. We also grow vegetables to try and make things go further. With this rationing we are grateful for anything home grown.’ Hopgood groaned inwardly. Where was this going?

‘That is good.’ Her funny face softened, the button eyes now glazed by a fond memory. ‘Flowers, oh so many flowers in the spring and summer, and then a new glasshouse he bought for us. It was beautiful, quite beautiful! I think that was 1930. He refused a gardener.’ She gave Hopgood a look that demanded he give her his full attention. ‘He could afford one by then, as the business was doing very well. Everyone needs a tin bath and other things for the kitchen, so his company was busy.’ She looked somewhere distant, as if wandering around a garden of fond memories. ‘He wanted me to work for the company, you understand. I could have been a secretary — a good position.’ Her look challenged him to disagree. ‘But I was always the wild one...Ha! I did...I did what I

felt I must.' She gave the cigarette some attention, her mouth dipping at one side as if the tobacco had turned bitter. 'But it was a good time. We thought we had it all.'

'Where was this?'

'Praha. You should be more attentive.' She gave him an admonishing look. '36 Zlatnicka Ulica. Take down the address.' She made an impatient movement with her hand as if dictating to a recalcitrant secretary. 'A smart address, and only a short walk to the factory each day.' She gave Hopgood a sharp look. 'He deserved it. Four years in that dammed war and yet he survived. So few came back from the Isonzo Front, so very, very few...' She shook her head sadly.

'Ah yes, your time in Prague. But this was before the war.'

'How could we stay...impossible...it nearly killed him to leave... there was no choice. Peter was clever, you see...always was, even as a boy. He saw them coming...knew what they would do when they got here.'

'The killers? He knew them?' Hopgood was suddenly alert. Was this a breakthrough?

'Yes, he knew the Germans had their eyes on the Sudetenland.'

'Ah. Of course.'

'Everyone said he was crazy, just imagining things, exaggerating.' She smoked hard for a moment, her face white as snow, eyes glazed. Hopgood sensed an unpleasant memory had taken hold. It felt like the air was becoming colder as well. 'All those years on the Front and he dies on a damned railway station!' She spat out the words along with a lungful of smoke.

'It does seem doubly cruel. If I might bring you back to the night of November 11th?' Hopgood was desperate to get her focussed on the investigation.

'There was cloud and also a moon. Sometimes cloud, sometimes moon, so I could see and then could not see. But I know every road and path. A bicycle is such a good way to travel, do you not think? Quiet and sometimes you can see foxes and their cubs playing on the path ahead. You can hear things, see things.'

'And what did you see and hear?'

'When?'

'When you were cycling near Bidston station that night.'

'You are a funny man — I was walking!' She spat a bit of tobacco from her lip. 'Too muddy...the wheels sink in...my bicycle was useless.' She shook her head at the stupidity of the inspector.

'Forgive me, I must have misunderstood.' Hopgood took a deep breath and held it for a moment. 'You last saw your brother in his office at the station that night. What time was this? Just so I am quite clear.'

'I brought him hot soup. He said I should not bother, but it is so lonely there and I thought he might like company, and at this time of year the fair is quite dead; there is nothing in the winter for me. It was ten minutes past ten. I remember the big clock on the wall. He made me sit beside the little stove and get warm. Always a gentleman. He had a chair ready for me.'

'At the station?'

'No, in the enamel factory! In his private office. I would go there most days. You really should concentrate.'

Hopgood tried to curb his annoyance. It was all going just as confusingly as ever. 'So you left him at Bidston, at what time?'

'Ten past ten, just as I told you. You have a really poor memory for a detective.' She gave him a crooked stare.

'You know we found a fishing rod outside the office door? We think the killer might have carried the gun with the rod to disguise it. Did you by any chance see some fishermen in the vicinity?'

'More shark than fish. I think he has sharp teeth. Like in the song.'

'Which song?' Hopgood was almost biting his tongue with frustration. Every time he thought they were getting somewhere, she would veer off at a bloody tangent. What was fact, and what was fiction? What was now, and what was in the distant past? Something about a song — a fat lot of use that was! Defence counsel would love this. D.S. Stanhope, much to Hopgood's intense annoyance, had won the first round of their argument. Miss Novakova — aka Newman, aka Mystic Marnie — was proving more hindrance than help in bringing the perpetrators to account.

'They were near the sea.'

'Sorry, who were?'

'The lads going fishing.'

'Which lads?'

'There were two. In black.'

'How do you know they were fishing?' Hopgood was excited: this was surely a breakthrough.

'Why else would they be coming off the Moss that late?'

'Right.' Hopgood could think of a number of reasons, including attacking her brother. 'Can you remember what these boys looked like?'

‘It was night and they wore black. I could see nothing. They had no faces I could see.’

‘Ah. What time was this? Do you think it was after Peter was killed?’

‘About eleven, maybe later.’ She dropped the cigarette butt on the ground and turned her shoe around to stamp it out. ‘After he died.’

Hopgood chewed this over for a moment. It was a lead of sorts, but still vague and imprecise. ‘One last thing, I know I have asked you before, but was Peter a stamp collector? I am interested in the Stanley Gibbons stamp catalogue we found in the office.’

‘Why do you keep asking me about this?’ Her eyes filled with tears and she turned away and blew her nose. ‘Why are you wasting time on some silly book?’