

Title

# **Untimely Death**

**By  
Cyril Hare**

*Woodstar Publisher, 2015*

**To ...**

*MICHAEL GILBERT*

### **About this eBook**

*“Untimely Death” by Cyril Hare*

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### **Note ...**

Exmoor, where the action of this book is represented as occurring, is, thank heaven, a real place, inhabited by living men and women. It should therefore be made clear beyond the possibility of doubt that the localities and characters here depicted are purely imaginary and bear no relation whatever to any existing place or person.

*C.H.*

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## Untimely Death

### *I Journey into the Past*

The holiday had been Eleanor's idea in the first place. Holidays for Francis Pettigrew signified first and foremost strange beds and a strange bed meant, for the first night at least, waking up in the small hours instead of sleeping through till dawn. None the less, as he lay wakefully watching the shifting pattern of the moon-shadows on the wall, he was prepared to concede that it was an excellent idea. Nowadays, he acknowledged, not without shame, it would be difficult to find any departure from the monotony of their rather humdrum joint existence that was not due to an idea of Eleanor's. More and more, with advancing years, he had tended to resign the initiative in affairs to his still young wife. It made for peace, and so far he had had no reason to regret it.

It had been Eleanor's idea, to begin with, to sell half her slender store of gilt-edged securities and invest them in industrial shares just at the beginning of the Stock Exchange boom in the early nineteen-fifties. It had been her idea, again, to convert part of the resulting profits into a small car, a moment before the prices of her holdings began to slide downwards in 1955. From the acquisition of the car to going away for a holiday was no more than a step. But it was a step that had consumed rather more time in the taking than either of them had contemplated. Eleanor had carried out her financial transactions with a gay disregard for the head-shaking of experts that had been triumphantly justified by the result. There are, however, some matters in which the head-shaking of experts is apt to be decisive, and the driving test is one of them. There had been a period when the whole project seemed likely to founder on the brutal requirements of the Road Traffic Acts. Pettigrew, who had firmly announced that he was too old to attempt to learn, had watched his wife's struggles in a frame of mind in which hope for her success and fear for his own safety were neatly balanced. Meanwhile, the summer passed. The holiday had been planned for the end of June; by the time Eleanor was at last made free of the road August was over.

Even there, Pettigrew reflected, her luck had held. Summer had miraculously prolonged itself into September, for one thing. That, of course, was a phenomenon from which a good many other people had benefited. One could not suppose that it had been arranged peculiarly in Eleanor's favour. But it had surely been by some special dispensation of Providence that almost at a moment's notice she had been able to find rooms to let in a farmhouse on the very edge of Exmoor at the height of the stag-hunting season. He had tried to indicate to her how extraordinarily lucky she had been, but Eleanor, who disapproved of blood-sports and had yet to learn of their importance in the economics of Exmoor, took her good fortune very much for granted. That being so, Pettigrew, who tended to become more secretive with advancing years, had not thought it worthwhile to enlarge on the coincidence that had brought him back to Sallowcombe after an interval so long that it fairly terrified him to contemplate it. That period of his life, in any case, was so remote that it had ceased to have any significance. Everything had changed since then, himself most of all. He came to the place as a complete newcomer. It was better so.

None the less, it had been somewhat of a shock when the car drew up before an entrance that seemed to have shrunk in size with the years but in no other respect had altered in the least. He had not thought that his recollection would be so clear. The shock had been even greater when on penetrating inside he found everything altered out of recognition. But it was a shock for the most part of relief. As a realist he could only be thankful for the change. He had loved the place dearly in those days, but he did not think that at his present age he could have endured its rigours, and he was quite certain that his wife could not. With a memory stimulated by his surroundings he recalled the Sallowcombe of his youth, with its persistent smell of the stable, the candles flickering in the fierce draughts, the lumpy feather beds, each

with its appropriate furniture beneath. He had thought it pure heaven then, but now . . . Thank goodness for a comfortable mattress, he reflected, as he wearily turned over for the tenth time, even if I can't sleep on it.

But if the Sallowcombe of today, with its indoor sanitation, smart threepiece suites and the television set in the visitors' lounge, was a change from the ramshackle establishment of the past, the difference was as nothing beside the difference between its inhabitants of then and now. Pettigrew remembered of old a coarse, jovial, occasionally drunken couple, slightly larger than life, as the figures of one's childhood are apt to be, who had alternately fascinated and terrified him. Their geniality had been overwhelming, their rages alarming, and their vocabulary, particularly when in their cups, had contributed freely to his education. In the place of this Dickensian pair now reigned a sober, widowed butcher whose home was admirably administered for him and for his visitors by his sober, widowed daughter. They were dull in comparison, but it made for comfort.

Thinking it over as he lay there, Pettigrew, an inveterate analyser of his fellows, wondered whether they were quite so dull as at first appeared. Of Mr. Joliffe he had so far seen little, though he liked what he had seen. He was a serious, elderly man, with the pink fleshiness that master butchers always seem to acquire in the way of their profession; and he showed clearly by his speech that he was not a native of Exmoor but had come to it from somewhere "up country". (Or should the phrase be "down country"? Pettigrew, who had not heard it used for half a century, puzzled his sleepy brain with the problem for some time before deciding that it did not matter and that in any case the expression, as a local usage, was probably long out of date.) He was the owner of a good business in Whitsea, on the coast a dozen miles away, and his farm was auxiliary to the business, just as the letting of rooms to visitors was auxiliary to the farm. It had surprised Pettigrew a little that so obviously prosperous a man as Joliffe should have concerned himself with yet a third, and comparatively trivial source of income. But that evening he had accidentally witnessed a scene which revealed Joliffe as a person unlikely to overlook any financial question, large or small. One of his small granddaughters had left the electric light on in an empty room. The result had been an explosion of temper quite out of proportion to the offence. Clearly, there were some things that could disturb the massive calm with which Mr. Joliffe confronted the world, and those were things that touched his pocket.

The granddaughter had accepted the reproof very calmly. Evidently, at twelve, she had learned to be philosophical in such matters. If anybody had been upset, it was her mother. Quiet, shy, soft-spoken Mrs. Gorman was obviously completely devoted to her two young daughters. She was no less obviously in some dread of her masterful father. But quiet and submissive as she was, Pettigrew had little doubt that if it came to the point, she would be prepared to dare anything or anyone in her children's interests. She was, he judged, of the possessive type of mother, whose affection for her young would leave no room for any real interest in any other human being.

Having arrived at this satisfactory conclusion, Pettigrew must have dozed off, for when he opened his eyes again the moonlight had vanished and in its place the first grey hint of dawn shewed through the window. It was very still and quiet. Only Eleanor's light breathing in the bed beside his own broke the silence. Yet he felt certain that he had been awakened by some noise, though he could not tell what. He lay listening for a moment or two and then his ear caught a small, grating sound from outside. In that instant, to his great surprise, he knew exactly what had made the sound and whence it came.

The back door of the farmhouse gave on to the farmyard, and next to the back door was an outhouse with a gently sloping lead roof. The window of one of the bedrooms in the older part of the house was immediately above that roof. For an active boy occupying the room who wanted to get in or out without his elders' knowledge, or for whom the stairs were too dull and

mundane a means of access, the outhouse made a convenient landing stage between ground and window. The recollection emerged sharp and keen from the depths of the past, provoked by the long-forgotten sound. Somebody was on the roof of the outhouse at that moment; and the room in question was not now occupied by a boy.

Pettigrew slipped out of bed without disturbing his wife, and peered out of window. The other side of the farmyard was in shadow, but he could just make out the line of the outhouse, and on the roof, pressed against the wall, the figure of a man. His head was level with the window, which was open at the bottom. He stood there motionless for a moment, and then in the semi-darkness the upper part of his body seemed to blend with another shape that appeared at the window. Pettigrew could just distinguish the pallor of two white arms that enfolded his head and shoulders. An instant later they were withdrawn, the window closed silently, the man dropped to the ground and vanished into the shadows.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good morning, sir! Good morning, madam! It's a lovely day and I've brought you your tea. Have you slept well? Would you be wanting eggs for breakfast or there's a nice piece of liver and bacon if you'd fancy that?"

Mrs. Gorman cooed as gently as a sucking dove. Pettigrew sat up in bed and contemplated that demure, slightly melancholy face, the calm, unruffled brow, the infinitely respectable demeanour. Anybody less like the heroine of an illicit love affair it would be hard to imagine. But he knew the layout of the house too well to have any doubt as to which was Mrs. Gorman's room. His judgment of character had been hopelessly at fault - not for the first time, he conceded. He felt at once irritated and amused. It was like living in a short story by Somerset Maugham.

As he dressed, his mind turned to the problem of the man's identity. In a remote spot such as this there could not be many candidates. . . .

"How many people does Mr. Joliffe employ on the farm, do you suppose?" he said to Eleanor at breakfast.

"Two or three, I think," she said. "There's an old man who milks the cows and a girl who drives the tractor."

"Isn't there a young, able-bodied man on the farm?"

"I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering," said Pettigrew.

## ***II The Hunt is Up***

Mrs. Gorman was right. It was a lovely day, and on such a day a picnic lunch was clearly indicated. When Eleanor went into the kitchen to suggest it to Mrs. Gorman she found that Doreen, the twelve year old, was already preparing the basket.

"The meet's at Satcherley Way, so you'll want to leave by half-past ten," she explained.

"The meet?" said Eleanor, puzzled.

"The meet," Doreen repeated, her large eyes round with surprise at such stupidity. "The meet of the stag-hounds. Didn't you see the card in the hall?"

"But what makes you think we want to go to the meet, Doreen?"

"Visitors always do."

"Well this one doesn't. I don't like hunting, and neither does Mr. Pettigrew."

"Cor!" said Doreen, in a tone of incredulity.

\* \* \* \* \*

So that there should be no doubt about the matter, Eleanor took the precaution of finding

Satcherley Way on the map before they set out, and the picnic took place at a spot which seemed reasonably remote from the contaminated area. So far as her husband was concerned, it was an immense success. The food was good, the weather was warm, the heather on which they reclined was deliciously soft and yielding. Decidedly the holiday had been an excellent idea of Eleanor's. If only he had been able to sleep better the night before. . . .

"Wake up, Frank," said Eleanor a little later.

"My dear, I am wide awake. I have never been anything else."

"Then you should not have been snoring. What was that noise I heard just now?"

"Obviously, I should have thought, my snoring. Or do you mean something else?"

"I do mean something else. Listen!"

Pettigrew was well awake by now, and straining his ears. In a moment he heard the sound, distant but clear and quite unmistakable.

"That was the horn," he said.

"A horn, did you say?"

"Yes." Actually, Pettigrew realized, he had said, not "a horn", but "the horn". It came to him with a little hock of recollection that there was a world of difference between the two. "A hunting horn. Perhaps they're running this way."

"I hope not," said Eleanor chillingly. "It must be a disgusting sight. But they may not be chasing a stag at all. The man was probably only blowing to call the dogs together."

"No." Pettigrew was quite decided on the point. "Hounds are running all right. He was doubling his horn." (The phrase slipped easily off his tongue - fantastically easy for one who had not used it for fifty years.)

"Frank!"

"Yes, my love?" Pettigrew turned from looking at the distant ridge of moorland to see his wife's brilliant blue eyes fixed on him accusingly.

"You seem to know a lot about this stag-hunting business. Have you been deceiving me all this time?"

"God forbid!"

"Have you ever been a huntsman?"

"Heavens, no! A huntsman is a highly skilled professional. I've only had one profession all my life. You know that."

"Don't quibble, Frank. You know what I mean. Have you ever been a hunter?"

"No, of course not! A hunter is . . . All right, I won't quibble. I do know what you mean. I will be honest. I have hunted. And with these hounds, too. But it was a long time ago."

"How long?"

"Longer than I care to think. When that I was a little tiny boy. My father used to bring us down here for the holidays."

"And you hunted," said Eleanor reproachfully.

"If you can call it hunting. I was put on a pony and bumped about the moor after the hounds. One hadn't much choice in the matter. Everybody did it."

"I see." Eleanor sounded mollified by his explanation. "You don't sound as if you enjoyed it very much."

"I wouldn't say that," said Pettigrew slowly. . . .

How fantastic to suppose that he had forgotten all about it! With the scent of the heather in his nostrils, the sound of the horn fresh in his ears, gazing across the valley at two distant hummocks which suddenly revealed themselves as the very oldest of old acquaintances, Pettigrew found his memory opening up like some monstrous flower, fold within fold. He saw himself, a small boy, jogging uncomfortably to the meet along a road innocent of motor traffic but thick with dust on a hard-mouthed, self-willed pony that could not accommodate its pace to that of the big hunter alongside. It was a pony given to habits so unpleasing and undignified



that even in retrospect he averted his mind from them; but once away, it would gallop forever. The boy was wearing what struck him now as fantastically uncomfortable clothes - a hard hat that seared his forehead, breeches that pinched his flesh below the knees, gaiters that never quite spanned the gap between the breeches and the heavy black boots. In his leather gloves he clutched a thonged hunting crop that was at once his greatest pride and an appalling encumbrance. One pocket was weighed down with a vast pocket knife equipped among other things with a hook designed to take stones out of horses' hooves; another bulged tightly over the packet of sandwiches, which, when eaten later in the day, would prove, whatever their composition, to taste of leather gloves and smell of sweating pony. His secret hope was that someone would give him for his birthday a man's-size sandwich box in a leather container which could be strapped to the saddle. The ultimate glory of a hunting flask might be attained next season, perhaps.

Pettigrew could see the boy in his mind's eye with remarkable clarity, except for one particular - his face. But if the features altogether escaped him, he could be sure of the expression, which he knew to be one of intense solemnity, the expression of the participant in a sacred rite. Had he enjoyed it? That was the very question they used to ask him at the end of the day, he remembered. He had always said "Yes", as a matter of course, before stripping off those agonizing breeches and plunging into a hot mustard bath. It was the answer they expected. But even then he had known how hopelessly inadequate the word "enjoy" was. One "enjoyed" so many things - parties, theatres, the common pleasures of life. Hunting was a thing apart - a compound of excitement and terror, discomfort and ecstasy, boredom and bliss.

...

"Well?" said Eleanor.

By now the picture of the small boy was becoming overlaid in Pettigrew's mind with a host of other images - his father's old-fashioned, full-skirted hunting coat, the Henry Aiken prints in the Sallowcombe dining-room, the echo of the peculiar wail of the Vicar's voice at Mattins. With an effort he came back to the present and looked for inspiration across the valley towards Tucker's Barrows. (How could he have forgotten that household name for an instant? he asked himself.) But the view gave him no help in self-expression. Rather flatly he said at last:

"Actually, it was rather fun."

"Fun!"

There was something in his wife's voice that made Pettigrew add hastily, "Fun for a boy of that age, of course, I mean."

"But even at that age, Frank, did you not realize the pointlessness, the wanton cruelty of the whole thing?"

"No, I certainly didn't. Boys don't, you know, unless there is someone about to point it out to them."

"I suppose not. Girls are different, of course."

Pettigrew, remembering certain female cousins among whom he had been brought up, opened his mouth to speak and then thought better of it.

In the silence that fell between them he became aware of a variety of small sounds - the buzzing of an intrusive fly, the plash of water from the stream in the combe below, and finally the sound for which, without realizing it, he had been straining his ears for minutes past - the faint whimper of hounds. It came for a moment only and was not repeated. Pettigrew was not surprised. Wherever they were running, he reflected, it was an even chance that it was uphill and through long heather or bracken. They would have little breath to spare to give tongue on a warm afternoon like this. It was, of course, a matter of complete indifference to him whether they were running, or in what direction; but he found himself none the less concentrating his attention upon a particular part of the skyline where the ground dipped to form a saddle



between the Barrows and another, less prominent eminence. The latter point he recognized at once, in his mood of reawakened sensitivity to the past. It was called Bolter's Tussock; and astonishingly enough, the absurd name evoked a thoroughly disagreeable sensation in his mind. Alone in that wide prospect of familiar, friendly scenes the place stood for something vaguely but unquestionably sinister. Something had occurred there so unpleasant that he had long since buried the recollection of it deep in his subconscious mind. Painfully and perversely he struggled to disinter it. He was almost on the point of success when the present intruded upon the past, and temporarily blotted it out. An object appeared momentarily on the skyline at the very point that he had selected for attention, and began to move at a steep angle down the slope opposite to where they sat. Pettigrew leapt to his feet, startling Eleanor, who had begun to assemble the contents of the picnic basket.

"There he goes!" he exclaimed.

Eleanor looked up, and after some little difficulty Pettigrew succeeded in pointing out the deer to her just before it disappeared in the wood of stunted oaks that clothed the lower slopes of the valley.

"Oh, the poor thing!" she said softly.

Pettigrew said nothing. Already the leading hounds were racing down the slope from the brow of the hill, not half a minute behind their quarry. Barring a miracle, the stag was doomed, though there might yet be an hour's tow-row down the water before he was booked. It was no use being sentimental about it. But telling himself so did not prevent him feeling sentimental, all the same. It was all of fifty years since he had last seen a hunted deer and now the sight of it had in some way dispelled the enchantment of reminiscence in which he had been living up to that moment. Willy-nilly, he found himself looking at the hapless beast through the eyes of the elderly, urban humanitarian who had somehow evolved from that small boy. He had forgotten that a stag looked so defenceless, lumbering along with its curious stiff-legged canter in front of the pitiless pack. A shrill squeal from below announced that someone had viewed the deer on his way down the valley, and he felt a sudden stab of pity for the victim.

This is quite illogical, he told himself. I shouldn't feel a bit like this for a hare, and if it was a fox I should have probably screamed my head off by now. Why the distinction? He pondered the problem gravely, while the field streamed across the slope opposite and clattered down the track that led through the wood. On serious reflection, he came to the conclusion that it was a question of size. A deer was altogether too big to hunt with a clear conscience. In sport one should always kill something a good deal smaller than oneself, something that succumbed easily, quickly, anonymously. A stag was too large to be anything but an individual, his death too difficult to be other than a prolonged personal affair.

"Honestly now, Frank," said Eleanor, "what do you think of it?"

"I think," said her husband deliberately, "that it would be much worse if they were elephants."

It was quite impossible to tell from Eleanor's expression what, if anything, she made of this remark. By way of reply, she picked up the rug on which they had been sitting, shook it free of crumbs and returned it to the car.

"The last of the hunters has gone," she said. "I think we've seen all that there is to see. Shall we be getting back?"

"By all means."

"You're sure you want to? You don't want to - to walk it off before you come home?"

"Walk it off? What do you mean?"

"Come, Frank, you know perfectly well."

Pettigrew looked at his wife in silence for a moment. Then he acknowledged defeat with a shrug of his shoulders.

"To be honest, I do," he said. "What beats me is how you know."

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it? You're suffering from a bad attack of - I suppose the psychologists have invented a technical term for it, but I should call it nostalgia. You've been living in a dream world of your own ever since we arrived at Sallowcombe. Was that where you used to stay when you were small, by the way?"

"You know perfectly well that it was," said Pettigrew, a shade bitterly. "I thought that I was being decently reticent about it, and all the time it appears that I've been making life quite intolerable for you by my sentimentalizing. I apologize."

"Don't be absurd, Frank, there is nothing to apologize for. Only it struck me, especially since this stag-hunting business began, that perhaps there was a ghost that wanted laying and you might be happier if you went ghost-hunting by yourself."

Francis Pettigrew was staring across the valley again in the direction from which the stag had appeared.

"A ghost!" he reflected. "Do you know, Eleanor, you are a great deal nearer the truth than even you have any business to be. There is a ghost, and I've only just remembered what it is."

He picked up the picnic basket and, walking over to the car, got into the passenger seat. Eleanor took her place at the wheel.

"So you've decided not to walk?" she said.

"I intend to walk," he replied, "but not from here. We'll drive round the head of the combe, and you can put me down near Bolter's Tussock."

"But that's taking you away from Sallowcombe."

"Not as much as you'd think. There's quite a good cross-country track past Tucker's Barrows that cuts off a mile of road. I shall manage it very well."

Eleanor started the car and they set off. Presently she asked: "Is there any particular virtue in Bolter's Tussock that makes you want to start your walk there?"

"I don't know that you'd call it a virtue, exactly, but it has one excellent qualification for ghost-laying."

"What is that?"

"Obviously, that it should be haunted."

They drove some distance in silence before Pettigrew spoke again.

"As you have not asked what I mean, I assume that you intend to rely on your usual uncanny methods to find out. I propose in this case to thwart you by the simple expedient of telling you outright. The plain fact is that I was more horribly frightened at Bolter's Tussock than I have ever been in my life."

"What by? Did your pony run away with you?"

"Actually, the pony did bolt - and anyone who thinks that isn't a frightening experience has no imagination. But that was afterwards. The real horror came first."

"Don't tell me about it if you'd rather not."

"Good Lord, I've no objection to talking about it now! The interesting thing is that this is literally the first time I have ever mentioned it to anybody. I was much too scared at the time to say anything, and after that I must have bottled it up inside me so successfully that I ended by forgetting it altogether - until about ten minutes ago. Memory's a funny thing, isn't it? Perhaps that suppressed memory was at the back of the hideous nightmares that used to plague me at school."

"Perhaps," said Eleanor a trifle acidly. "But I shouldn't like to give an opinion till you'd told me what 'it' was."

" 'It' was simply a dead man."

"On Bolter's Tussock?"

"Yes."

"What was it doing there?"

"I have no idea - I never found out."

"And you - you just left it there?"

"I left very quickly, when the pony bolted."

"But somebody else must have found it, even if you said nothing. Didn't you read about it in the papers or hear people talking about it?"

"One doesn't read the papers much at that age, except the cricket scores, and I didn't listen to what my elders said about things like that."

"You seem to have been remarkably incurious."

"Incurious! Good God, woman, can't you understand? I was terrified. I didn't want to know any more about it. I was convinced that if anything came out, I should be made in some way responsible. For days afterwards I couldn't see a policeman without being certain that he was going to ask me about the body on Bolter's Tussock. Every time my father opened a newspaper I was sure he would read out an account of it, and turn on me with some deadly question which would end in my being hauled off to prison. And then time went by - it can't have been more than a week or so, really, but it seemed longer - and the holidays were over, and I was safe back at prep school and nothing had happened."

He stopped abruptly and looked out of the window.

"All right, you can put me down here," he said.

He got out of the car. In the bright autumn sun, Bolter's Tussock, above and to the left of where he stood, looked as innocent and peaceful as any strip of moorland could well do. From far down the valley a distant cry of hounds told him that the hunt was still afoot.

"Have a good walk," said Eleanor. "And don't be too disappointed if -"

"If what?"

"If there's nothing there after all."

### *III Minster Tracy*

Having left her husband to walk home, Eleanor took the opportunity to carry out a plan which had long been in her mind. She would call on Hester Greenway.

Hester Greenway had been Eleanor's best friend at school. She had not seen her for a long time, but they had kept in touch over the years. They remembered each other's birthdays, and every Christmas brought from Hester not only a small hand-made gift in impeccable taste but a long, chatty letter. Frank had never met her, and it is regrettably to be recorded that he had taken a strong dislike to her, solely on the strength of her taste in Christmas presents and her epistolary style. For this reason, Eleanor had seen fit to say nothing to him of the arrangement by which she was now driving, not back to Sallowcombe, but to Minster Tracy.

Following the directions she had been given, Eleanor turned off the main road down a lane that led her into a deep valley. As she rounded a bend, she saw below her Tracy Church, embowered in trees, the inevitable stream purling past its west door. Hester's father had been vicar of the parish, which after his death had been amalgamated with another, because its small and dwindling population could not support an incumbent of its own. Eleanor knew all this, and that Minster Tracy was reputed to be the second smallest church in England; but she had not expected anything quite so tiny or so lonely. The minute church was surrounded by a well-filled churchyard, but she could see no living habitation. Only when she had almost reached it did she notice a pair of stone pillars marking the entrance to a drive that led to a house of some substance set well back from the road. A little further on, the furious barking of a Sealyham terrier announced her arrival at Hester's little house.

Eleanor had not been prepared for the Sealyham. Hester had not betrayed any interest in dogs during their schooldays, or in that never-to-be-forgotten fortnight in Florence which had been the highlight of their friendship. Herself not a dog-lover, she was perhaps unreasonably