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The Corpse on the Court

Written by Simon Brett

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THE CORPSE ON THE COURT

A Fethering Mystery

Simon Brett



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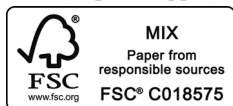
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ONE

Forty-fifteen! Chase more than a yard worse!' called out the young marker, and the pairs of white-clad players changed ends.

To Jude his words made about as much sense as if she'd stumbled into a science fiction alternative universe. She knew the game they were playing was called 'real tennis' and that 'real' in this context meant 'royal'. She even knew, because Piers had told her, that in America the game was called 'court tennis'. But though he had spent painstaking hours spelling them out to her, she still hadn't a clue what the rules were.

To be fair, it was the first time she'd been inside a real tennis court. Up until that moment her knowledge of the game had been entirely theoretical. 'It'll all make sense when you actually see the place,' Piers kept telling her airily. So far his optimistic view was not being borne out. Maybe if he were sitting beside her in what she had been assured was called the 'dedans', he might have been able to provide a running commentary on what was going on. But Piers Targett was one of the four players on court, clearly engrossed in this incomprehensible contest.

Jude had had lovers before who'd been interested in sport – not many, it was true, more had come from the artistic community – but this was the first time she had encountered one who was into real tennis.

She looked around the court, trying to make sense of it. When he'd first mentioned the game – on their first date at Arbutus – Piers had said, 'You know, like at Hampton Court. Everyone's seen the one at Hampton Court . . . where King Henry VIII played . . . saggy net . . . you *know*,' he had concluded airily. 'Airy', Jude had soon discovered was Piers Targett's conversational default setting.

Jude had been taken to Hampton Court as a small girl, but her main recollection of the occasion had been of crying when she got lost in the maze. Maybe King Henry's tennis court had been

pointed out to her, but it had not proved memorable to her childish preoccupations.

The court she surveyed that Sunday morning had been constructed in the late nineteenth century by the family who built the adjacent Lockleigh House on the foothills of the South Downs, about midway between Clincham and Fedborough. The Wardocks had made a lot of money in that period's boom in lawn tennis – or 'lawners', as Piers always referred to the upstart – but they had retained an interest in the much older version of the game.

Members of the Wardock family had continued to live in Lockleigh House until the end of the Second World War when declining business and increasing costs had forced them to sell up. Since that time the mansion had had various incarnations . . . as a hotel, a boy's prep school, and for the last twenty years as the Lockleigh House Nursing Home for the Elderly. The tennis court was owned by the care home company, who leased it out to the Lockleigh House Tennis Club. Some four hundred members kept the court fairly busy from the first hour-and-a-quarter booking at seven forty-five in the morning to the last at eight fifteen p.m.

The 'dedans' in which Jude had been told she was sitting was at one end of the rectangular court. Benches were arranged in rows behind a large slot in the wall, the shape of a giant letterbox. The purpose of this was clearly not just so that the spectators could see the action. Every time a ball thundered into the dedans it prompted clapping, so clearly a point had been scored. And given the speed at which the hard balls arrived, there was comfort in the fact that stout netting stopped them from hitting the spectators.

The atmosphere among those watching was distinctly benign. Though clearly absorbed in the game, they had an air of levity about them. Applause was accorded to what Jude assumed was good play, but there were also a lot of cheery insults called out between points. Though Piers was the only person in the court who Jude knew, she felt very welcome there.

The young man who was marking the game sat at the far end of the front bench in the dedans, calling out ever more obscure – to Jude – incantations, like 'better than the door', 'hazard chase the line' and 'more than a yard worse'. He had been introduced

to her as 'Ned Jackson, our junior pro' and his was one of the few names she had retained from the list that Piers had reeled out to her on their arrival.

She had also taken on board the information that the event being contested that Sunday morning was the Secretary's Cup, known rather waggishly to all members of the Club as 'The Sec's Cup'. During their drive down from Bayswater in his E-Type Jaguar (Carmen red with black leather upholstery) Piers had explained to her that this was 'a doubles competition with random pairings'. His allocated partner was a teenage girl called Tonya Grace. Piers and Tonya had won through the preliminary rounds on the Saturday to earn a place in the finals.

He had also once again tried to describe the court to her, and once again assured her airily that it'd all make sense when she saw the thing.

It didn't, though. The area was probably about the same size as a lawn tennis court, but it was walled in. The floor was mostly painted in oxblood red, though a section at the far end was green. Different coloured lines, parallel to the net, were marked on the surface. On the walls, presumably to identify these lines, large numerals were painted.

Maybe twenty feet above the ground the side walls became large windows, leading up to a pitched glass roof. Although this transparent ceiling shed quite a lot of daylight on the court, between the rafters hung large silver-shaded lamps to illuminate the playing area. Along either side at the level of the windows were wooden walkways, presumably to give access for cleaning and maintenance.

On the wall to her left and the one facing her, Jude could see sloping roofs about ten feet off the ground. And the sound of balls bouncing on the wood above her head suggested that the dedans was covered by a similar penthouse. They looked like covered walkways and indeed under the long one was the passageway through which she had been escorted to her spectating position. The walls beneath this long roof only rose to about three feet; above that wooden support posts divided the space into window-like sections. Like the dedans, these recesses were backed by strong netting, presumably for the same reasons of safety.

On the right-hand wall at the far end was another strange feature, a rectangular recess that looked like a blocked-off window.

Just when Jude was reckoning that her survey had found enough architectural eccentricities, she noticed that towards the end of the long right-hand wall a section juttred out from floor to ceiling. For no apparent reason. Or no more reason than was offered by the other oddities she'd observed. But she did notice that any ball hitting this angled feature was likely to fly off all over the place.

And of course there was the saggy net that Piers had promised. Maybe as high as five feet at the sides, going down in an inverted arc to about three in the middle.

Another oddity to puzzle anyone who had only previously watched lawn tennis was the proliferation of balls on the court. Fifty, maybe sixty, accumulated at the foot of the net or in a wooden runnel in the dedans. The balls were covered in yellow felt and about the size of their lawn tennis cousins. But their minimal bouncing capacity and the sound they made when they hit the wooden parts of the court suggested they were a lot harder.

There was something odd about the rackets too. For a start, their frames were made of wood, which should perhaps have raised memories of long summer afternoon duels between Bjorn Borg and John McEnroe. But the shape was wrong for such comparisons. Bizarrely, the real tennis rackets were not symmetrical. The head came out at a slight angle from the handle, giving the impression of a bent spoon. The alternative reality that Jude had felt herself a part of was now veering into Alice in Wonderland territory.

Her confused scrutiny was interrupted by the sound of a bell ringing and an eruption of applause from the benches in the dedans.

Time to seek help. She turned to the woman next to her and asked pitifully, 'What happened then?'

'Winning gallery,' came the reply.

'Ah.'

The blankness on Jude's face prompted the woman to ask, 'Don't you know the game?'

‘First time I’ve seen a real tennis court.’

The woman smiled knowingly. ‘Welcome to a world of obsession and eccentricity. My name, by the way, is Oenone Playfair.’
‘Jude.’

A thin hand reached out to grasp her plump one. ‘Sorry about the Oenone. My father had a classical education.’ Jude must have looked blank again, because the woman immediately provided a gloss for her. ‘Oenone was Paris’ first wife. The one he dumped when he went off after Helen of Troy.’ She spoke very quickly, her words tumbling together in the manner of an enthusiastic academic.

‘Ah,’ said Jude.

‘Well, I suppose if you’re going to be dumped for anyone, Helen of Troy at least has class. Better than your husband going off with his secretary . . . or the checkout girl at Tesco.’

‘I suppose so. Anyway, sorry, you just said something about a winning gallery . . .?’

‘Right. Yes, of course you’re new to all this. Don’t worry, it only takes about ten years to understand the rudiments of the game.’

‘Thanks very much. Do you play?’

Oenone Playfair grimaced. ‘Oh yes. Haven’t been on the court since I had my hip replaced, though. First operation didn’t work, dammit . . . so it’ll soon be a few months before I’m back playing.’

Jude was surprised. Her question had only been a polite enquiry. It hadn’t occurred to her that Oenone, who had to be well into her seventies, might really still play the game.

‘Anyway, the winning gallery . . .’ her new friend twittered on and pointed down the left-hand side of the court. ‘Last gallery down the hazard end . . . any ball that goes in there is an outright winner. And there’s a bell hung on the netting, which should ring . . .’ Jude understood that bit. ‘Though sometimes if the ball goes in for a chase in hazard second, that can make it ring too.’ And once again Jude was lost.

‘So that player –’ she indicated a grey-haired, red-faced man whose portly belly raised the bottom of his shirt sufficiently to reveal a half-moon of flesh above the top of his shorts – ‘has just scored a point by hitting the ball into the winning gallery?’

‘Exactly.’ Oenone nodded vigorously. ‘Yes, a shot in the winning gallery is the Holy Grail for real tennis players . . . and I can guarantee I’ll never hear the end of it.’ Jude raised an interrogative eyebrow. ‘He’s my husband. Reggie.’

‘Ah, so that’s why you’re here?’

‘I’d have come even if Reggie hadn’t made it to the finals. The Sec’s Cup’s always good fun.’ Oenone Playfair looked at Jude shrewdly. ‘Any particular reason why you’re here?’

Jude gestured to the court. ‘I’m with him.’

The older woman nodded, as if some small mystery had just been explained to her. ‘Ah, you’re Piers’ latest.’

Jude wasn’t quite sure that she relished that definition, but she didn’t comment, and further conversation was interrupted by a tap on Oenone’s shoulder from a tall, grey-haired man in pebble glasses. He was dressed in ordinary clothes rather than tennis whites, a large-checked sports jacket and mulberry-coloured corduroy trousers. His thinly knotted tie featured crossed gold rackets under the emblem of a fish on a background of purple and green stripes. Other men in the dedans were wearing the same, so presumably it was the Lockleigh House club tie. And in fact Jude noticed the same logo in the blocked window feature at the other end of the court.

The man shook his head. ‘Sitting there without a drink I see, Oenone – tut, tut. Can I get you one?’ His voice sounded as if it had been marinated in superior claret.

Oenone Playfair declared that she wouldn’t say no to a Sauvignon Blanc, then continued, ‘Wally, may I introduce Jude?’

He reached forward to take the newcomer’s hand. ‘Enchanted,’ he said, and he clearly was. Over the years Jude had got used to the appreciative eyes of men, even now that she was fatter and in her fifties. ‘My name’s Wally Edgington-Bewley.’

‘Today’s Jude’s first time inside a real tennis court.’

‘Is it really, Oenone? Well, Jude, we must celebrate that fact by my buying you a drink. Would Sauvignon Blanc fit the bill for you too?’

Jude looked around. Though it was not yet eleven o’clock in the morning, many of the spectators – even some dressed in white and presumably soon to go on court – were nursing wine glasses. Be churlish not to join them.

So she replied, 'That'd be fine, thank you . . . unless there's a bottle of Chardonnay open.'

'Of course. Chardonnay it is.'

An elegant woman in a beautifully-cut tweed suit took a seat a little way away from them in the dedans. Probably in her sixties, she must once have been absolutely stunning and still looked pretty good. Bright blue eyes and hair so skilfully coloured that its blondness could actually have been natural. Wally turned to her with his customary charm. 'Just going on a drinks run, Felicity. Get you a snifter?'

She smiled, revealing perfectly maintained teeth and replied in a perfectly modulated voice, 'Bit early in the day for me, Wally.'

'Right you are. Oh, Felicity, can I introduce Jude? She's here with Piers. First time she's seen a real tennis court.'

'Ah.' The woman's blue eyes politely appraised the newcomer. She reached out a slender hand for Jude to shake. 'I'm Felicity Budgen.'

'Wife of our esteemed chairman,' said Wally. 'Right, off on my drinks run. One Sauvignon Blanc, one Chardonnay. And when I return, Jude, I will tell you all about the game of real tennis.'

'Oh, I'd like that.'

'Be careful what you wish for,' murmured Oenone as soon as Wally Edgington-Bewley was out of earshot.

'What do you mean?'

'Wally is a kind of historian of the game. Knows more about it than probably anyone on the planet. Even written a book on the subject. If he's going to tell you "all about the game of real tennis", I'd make sure you've got a couple of weeks free.'

'Oh, right. Well, thanks for the warning.'

'And would you be able to have a couple of weeks free?'

'Sorry?'

'It's my rather contrived and roundabout way of asking what you do.'

'Ah. Well, I'm a kind of alternative therapist.'

'Healer?'

'That kind of thing, yes.'

'Maybe I should get you to take a look at Reggie.'

'Oh?'

‘Well, look at him.’ Oenone Playfair gestured towards the court as if pointing out a particularly uncontrollable puppy. ‘He doesn’t take care of himself at all. He’s seventy-four next year, and he’s had a couple of heart scares. I keep trying to get him to make some changes in his lifestyle, but will he? Will he hell.’

And as Jude saw Reggie Playfair puff his way to miss another ball, she could see what his wife meant. His face was redder than ever and sweat dripped off nose and chin. Individual damp patches on his white shirt were starting to join together.

Oenone raised her eyes to heaven, expressing the hopelessness of trying to make her husband change in any particular, then asked, ‘So do you do your healing work at home?’

‘Yes.’

‘And where is home?’

‘Fethering. Do you know it?’

‘Of course. Just down from Fedborough. Where the River Fether reaches the sea.’

‘Exactly.’

‘And you’re kept busy, are you . . . you know, with the healing?’

‘It varies.’ And with a feeling that was uncharacteristically close to guilt, Jude realized that she hadn’t actually treated any clients for a couple of weeks. Hadn’t actually been to her home, Woodside Cottage, for a couple of weeks. Since Piers Targett had come into her life. Or since she had moved into Piers Targett’s life.

Something happened on the court that prompted raucous applause and cheering. ‘Game, set and match!’ called out Ned Jackson, for the first time that morning saying something that Jude could understand. She watched the four players exchange handshakes over the low scoop of the net.

‘Reggie will be insufferable now,’ Oenone Playfair observed.

‘I’m sorry? Why?’

‘Well, they won – didn’t you notice? Means they’ll go through to the semis.’

‘Ah.’

‘And Reggie will be particularly pleased to have beaten your Piers. There’s always been quite a lot of rivalry between those two.’

‘Friendly rivalry, I hope.’

‘Oh, yes, friendly . . . not that that means it doesn’t go deep.’

They looked up at the arrival of the four players in the dedans. Reggie immediately found a bottle of red wine and poured a glass, which he quaffed with relish. Piers, crossing towards Jude, ruffled his hand ruefully through her bird’s nest of blonde hair. ‘Not my brilliant best this morning, I’m afraid.’ He grinned at Oenone. ‘See you two’ve met. What’ve you been putting in the old man’s cocoa? He was on fire.’

‘Who’ll they be playing in the semi?’

‘Whoever wins the next one.’

Jude looked with pleasure at Piers Targett. Though in his sixties, he didn’t have the kind of metabolism that put on weight and looked surprisingly trim. His hair was white but abundant and he wore it almost foppishly long with a centre parting. Eyes of a surprisingly deep blue. The recent exertions on the tennis court had not raised a sweat on his pristine polo shirt. His long white trousers were neatly creased, with a knotted striped old school tie doing service as a belt.

He turned at the approach of his young doubles partner, who had just been chatting with Felicity Budgen. The girl was pretty with black hair and ice-blue eyes. She moved coltishly as if she hadn’t quite got used to her long limbs ‘Sorry, Tonya,’ said Piers with mock humility. ‘If the way I was playing this morning doesn’t give you the message to steer clear of old men, then nothing will.’

The girl smiled nervously. On the court she had looked secure; she had been well taught, moving effortlessly into the right positions and returning the ball with a strength that was surprising in one so slender. Outside the game, however, she was awkward, aware of her juvenile status amongst so many older people.

‘Bad luck, Tonya,’ Oenone Playfair commiserated and was rewarded by another edgy grin. ‘How are Roman and Natalya?’

‘Oh, you know. Grandpa’s lost it a bit, really.’

‘Yes, so I’d heard. Oh, sorry, this is Jude.’

‘Nice to meet you,’ said the girl politely.

‘Anyway, Tonya,’ said Piers, ‘let me get you a drink by way of apology for my appalling tennis. What would you like?’

‘Oh, just a Coke, please, thank you.’

‘Sure. And what about you ladies? Oenone . . .?’

‘Wally’s getting drinks for us.’

‘What a gentleman that Wally is.’ Piers grinned ruefully at an approaching young man in a smart blue tracksuit. ‘Sorry, George, my volleying was all over the shop this morning. Forgot everything you told me in that last lesson.’

The man grinned back. ‘Can’t win ’em all.’

‘No, winning some would be nice, though. George, must introduce you to a friend of mine. Jude, this is George Hazlitt, the club’s senior pro.’

‘Nice to meet you.’

‘You too.’ The professional smiled the smile of a man who had never doubted his attractiveness to women.

‘George used to be top five in the world,’ said Piers.

‘A while ago, mind.’ This was said with a self-deprecating grin. Close to, George Hazlitt was older than he had first appeared, probably well into his forties. It was his extreme fitness that made him look young.

He moved away. ‘I’ll take over the marking for this one, Ned,’ he said. ‘You go and get a cup of coffee.’

‘Thanks, George.’ The younger pro slid off his bench. As he moved through the crowd, he came face to face with Tonya Grace. Jude noticed the two of them exchange a private grin. Then the girl blushed and turned away.

A new pair of doubles was now knocking up on court, so George Hazlitt’s marking skills were not yet required. To Jude’s amazement she saw him pick up a bag from beside the bench where he was sitting and start sewing. Yes, no question about it. He had some pieces of yellow felt which he was sewing together with a large needle. His movements were practised, automatic; he hardly looked at what he was doing.

Jude nudged Oenone Playfair and nodded her head towards the Pro. ‘Does he have a side line in embroidery?’ she whispered.

The older woman grinned. ‘No, he’s making balls.’ Seeing Jude’s puzzlement, she went on, ‘Real tennis balls are handmade – and they don’t last long. It’s part of the professional’s job to keep up the supply.’

‘Ladies, your drinks,’ announced the marinated voice of Wally Edgington-Bewley. ‘Now, Jude, move along a bit, make room

for me . . . and I will regale you with the complete history of the ancient game of real tennis . . .’

It must have been about half past twelve. Jude was on her third glass of Chardonnay and feeling no pain. From the club room area behind the dedans wafted intriguingly spicy smells. Piers had promised her that ‘the lunches are always very good for the Sec’s Cup – there’s an Indian member who does these amazing curries on the Sunday.’ The smells made her realize that she was very hungry. She’d only snatched a slice of toast by way of breakfast at Piers’ Bayswater flat. And that had been before seven o’clock.

Still, Jude was quite content. Though Wally Edgington-Bewley had continued to ply her with dates and statistics, she hadn’t taken any of it in. She had remained sitting with Oenone Playfair, but their circle had widened as Piers introduced her to more of the real tennis fraternity. She was struck by how nice they all were. And a little surprised by how mixed. Though she heard a good few hyphenated names and cut-glass vowels, there were plenty of members whose voices suggested much humbler origins.

But the main thing that impressed Jude was how much they all seemed to like Piers Targett. The whirlwind of their romance over the previous few weeks had not involved much socializing with other people. But Piers had been committed to participating in the Secretary’s Cup before they’d met, so this was really the first time he had introduced Jude to any of his friends. And she enjoyed seeing him in a context where he so clearly felt at ease.

On the court Reggie Playfair and his partner were playing their semi-final match. And they were finding the going tougher than they had in the previous round. Their opponents were both fit men in their thirties and though, according to Piers, they were ‘giving away a lot in the handicap’ (whatever that meant), they were making few mistakes and slowly grinding down the older pair. His partner was coping with the pressure better, but there was now an air of desperation about the way Reggie hurled his ageing body around the court.

In spite of everything Piers had told her and the information overload supplied by Wally Edgington-Bewley, Jude still hadn’t grasped the basic rules of real tennis. During the rallies, she could

vaguely understand what was going on, but the scoring and the reasons why the players kept changing ends left her completely baffled. She didn't mind, though. Calmed by Chardonnay, she settled into cheerful incomprehension and let her mind wander.

Suddenly there was a commotion at the far end of the court. Jude missed the first impact, but it looked as though Reggie Playfair had slipped and crashed into the side wall. The consternation among the spectators, however, suggested something more serious. Oenone seemed frozen in shock. George Hazlitt was instantly up from his bench and in charge of the situation. 'Henry, you're a doctor. Go and check him out. I'll get the defibrillator.' And the professional was suddenly running up the passageway alongside the court.

At the far end, on the painted floor, Reggie Playfair lay very still.