Opening Extract from...

The Unquiet Heart

Written by Gordon Ferris

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But for the unquiet heart and brain
A use in measured language lies;

In Memoriam, *V*: Stanza 2.
Alfred Lord Tennyson

Author's note:

I have taken the liberty of weaving into my fiction some real events involving real people in 1946. For example, while Heinrich Mulder is a composite, Menachem Begin is real. The B1A unit in MI5 really existed, and most certainly, the events in Palestine happened. My intention was not to take sides in this complex and contentious run-up to the birth of a nation, but to suggest that truth depends on your vantage point in history.

ONE

A pub fight doesn't start in a pub. It begins that afternoon when you're laid off at the yards. It starts a month back when you look in the mirror and see your old man gazing back at you, and this revelation of mortality starts eating at your balls. It begins a year ago when you come home from the war flashing your medals – and find the wife has left you for one of those fellas with feet just flat enough to keep him out of khaki but swift enough to be a bookie's runner. Something sours the day or the year or your life and you bring it into the pub like a rat in your belly. All it takes is a clumsy shoulder, a spilled drink, a guy with a small brain and a big mouth, and the first punch gets thrown.

You would think it was the big blokes you had to be careful of, but big guys usually have nothing to prove. It's the pipsqueak you need to sidestep, the little man who feels shat on all his life for having to look up at folk all the time. There seems to be an inverse law operating: the smaller the man the bigger the chip.

Normally – unless I'm the cause of it, or it's to help a mate – I quietly pick up my pint and move to the lounge bar till they get it out their system. If it's really bad, and there are tables

and bottles flying, I find another pub. I should have stuck to my rule this evening.

I'd had time to kill, so I walked down Albany Road, crossed the Old Kent Road and headed into Bermondsey. It had taken a pasting. Incendiaries had gutted whole streets and you could take short cuts through rows of houses following the paths taken by Jerry's visits. I took back streets and footpaths, twisting and turning until I connected with Jamaica Road. Then into the warren, past gaps like old women's gums among the warehouses and tenements. I emerged by the Thames and leaned on the wall to watch the darkness settle on the water and the mists swirl and flow like a ghost stream above it. I dropped my second cigarette into the current and headed east, along the spine of Rotherhithe, following the curve of the river.

The Angel sat by itself, poised over the water. It was the latest incarnation of a hostelry that had stood on the site since Captain Kidd sailed upriver in chains on his way to a good hanging. The bombs that fell the night the East End was aflame had taken out a row of houses opposite and half the buildings alongside. A church had been flattened just a hundred yards away. But the Angel was untouched, proving to the wittier locals the power of prayer.

The wind whipped up the Thames like a banshee. I clamped my hat harder to my head and pulled my mac tighter against the flurries of rain. Flaming June indeed. There was hardly a street light for miles, but the occasional gap in the clouds let the full moon pour on the rippled surface of the water. My shadow stretched out behind me.

The noise from the pub eddied and whirled on the stiff breeze. I crossed the road and stood in front of it, wondering why I'd agreed to this meeting. I looked behind me and then

back at the pub. The mouldering wood suggested they were the original panels, and no painter had been allowed near in three hundred years. A tired sign creaked on its chains: a faded angel gazing down at me, blind and uncaring. Behind dirty windows silhouettes of drinkers nodded and laughed like a magic lantern show. I pushed the door open and walked back in time. The original customers were still on a bender: blackguards to a man, with strong piratical tendencies.

The place was sweating and jostling and roaring. It was half nine, twenty minutes before last orders, and men were buying multiple rounds as though the end of the world had been announced. Which of course it would be, in twenty minutes. The thought of cutting off the supply of Dutch courage and alcoholic bonhomie was beyond bearing. Make that a double, and have one yourself!

I looked round for my man: a tall bloke, I'd been told, wearing a flat cap and carrying a newspaper. The one-roomed bar was full of flat caps perched over shouting mouths in flush-faced groups. A few men drank alone, supping at their ales to wipe out the past and get a rosier view of tomorrow. One man caught my eye. He was better shaved than the rest, and his eyes less bleary. A paper was rolled tight under his hand like a sergeant major's baton. He'd seen me as I walked in. His eyes swivelled left and right like he was crossing the road. He nodded, got up and came towards me. He was my height, white-faced, serious-eyed, a penitent. I hoped he'd got something to confess.

"McRae?" he asked, in a voice pitched to be heard above the roar. In that one word I heard the cadences of Ireland.

I nodded. He waved a part-drunk beer at me. I nodded again. He indicated I should grab his seat while he got a round in. He

gave me his paper and went to the bar. I squeezed behind the table and sat down with my back to the wall, eyes stinging with fag smoke and the rank stink of old pubs and sweaty men. It was a smell common to bars from Sutherland to Southend, and hauled me back to the Working Men's club in Kilpatrick, and the time my father took me in to show me off to his pals. Small men with bright eyes and scrubbed faces, but nothing could erase the black pits of coal dust around their noses.

I unrolled the paper and smoothed out the front. The picture shook me, though I'd seen it a dozen times in the last ten days now. It didn't do her justice, but it was enough. I rubbed my eyes and looked up, just in time to see the action.

It happened fast. They must have planned it well. I saw my man take a push from a thickset man with curly hair. My man turned and joshed him and turned back to the bar. The big guy wasn't to be ignored. Another push and the drinks were all over the bar. A push became a punch and my man went down. Two other heavies appeared and began to shove and shout at the bystanders. It didn't take much to start a fight. This was the wrong end of the Old Kent Road and people had old-fashioned ideas of honour and face. The last of the duellists.

My rules of self-preservation went out the window. Though it was a stranger in trouble he had information I wanted badly. Or so I'd been promised by Pauli Gambatti who'd set up the meeting. With blokes like Gambatti it's hard to know whether they're doing you a favour or stitching you up. It shows how desperate I was. I would try anything, go anywhere to find out what happened to Eve Copeland, whose accusing eyes stared out at me from the newspaper.

I sprang to my feet, fists clenched, ready to get stuck in, to get my man off the floor. A kicking is always a bad event. I

made two steps before my legs were clipped from under me and I went down like Charlie Chaplin. I made to rise and found a knee on my back and a hand like a shovel on my neck. A voice leaned over, a thick, European brogue in my ear:

"Forget her. It is not your fight. None of it is your fight. You hear me?"

I nodded as well as a man might with his face in the sawdust. The stench of the beer-soaked floorboards filled my nostrils. All I could see was clattering feet like a rugby ruck. I prayed my head wouldn't become the ball. The shouting went on, then it stilled, and the knee came off. The hubbub picked up again, and I turned over as fast as I could. I saw a pair of legs disappearing through the crowd: black boots with heavy tacks on their soles. All the better to kick you with. The man who'd knelt on me turned briefly and I had a good look. Cadaverous cheeks as though he was sucking them in for a bet, and blue eyes that laughed at me under his cap. Then he was gone.

I got to my feet feeling stupid. So much for my SOE training. I brushed off the sawdust and the fag ends and looked for my man. A crowd stood round where he'd gone down. I pushed my way through. He wouldn't be telling me anything now. He was face down in his own red pool, his head turned to one side. His eye stared at something we couldn't see, and his breath came in little pants. A broken bottle lay beside his throat. Shards of glass glinted red, lodged in his neck. He was beyond first aid, or indeed second or third. Bugger. His already pale face was blanched. Lank hair spread round his head, mopping up his own blood. One hand twitched, trying to plug the holes in his neck. The other reached out and hung itself over the brass foot-rail like a drowning man. Suddenly the tension went out of his body. With a glint and a clunk, a knife dropped from the dead fingers.

As an ex-copper I knew my civic duty was to stay and answer questions and help them all I could with their inquiries, even accompany them to the nick and spend all night making a statement. So I joined the fast and shifty queue that was moving out the back door. The landlord held the door. He wasn't wishing us good night. He was thinking of his licence and the mess on the floor and endless questions coming his way. I came out in a side street and scampered into the dark with all the other cockroaches. This far from civilisation, it would take a while for the bell of a squad car to reach us, but no sense in loitering.

I had no doubt my man had just been murdered. It was a set piece. But who set it? Gambatti? A complicated way of doing business. Someone who found out Gambatti had arranged the meet? But why did they wait till I showed? To warn me off? To make me a witness? There are easier ways of getting through to me, though I supposed I should be grateful for the warning. But I couldn't afford to heed it.

My heart lurched again. If they could kill a man to stop him talking, what might have happened to Eve? What was so important? I walked the long dark miles home to Camberwell, mulling over the upheaval in my life that started just eight weeks ago when she walked into it. I should have stuck with my first feelings about her and thrown her out…

TWO

Eight weeks. If you were a student of morals and manners you could earn yourself a PhD by sitting behind my desk for eight weeks. They all pass through my office: the crazies with a grudge who want me to spy on their neighbour; the tortured and vengeful who want the goods on their two-timing lovers; the desperate who think you can find the son missing since D-Day; or the wife who walked out years ago and won't ever come back, and you can see why.

They dump their sins and suffering on my desk with diffidence or bluster, tears or temper, certainty or fear. Most times they know the answer; they just need someone else to prove it or say it out loud. It seems to help them if they pay for it, though not all of them do. They want solutions and absolution from an ex-copper trying to make a living as a private detective in a rundown flat in a bombed-out corner of South London. I don't tell them I'm also a former Special Operations agent and a one-time inmate of a concentration camp; every Londoner has a war story. Every pub echoes to their tales. They don't need to hear mine.

I try not to turn anyone away. But I don't always take on a case. It's hard to be prescriptive. Hunger stretches a man's

ethics. I've tried drawing up a list of stuff I will do and stuff I won't. I made a deal with myself when I started this business that I wouldn't do anything illegal or immoral. But it's not as if I wrote it in stone. Like when I had to do a bit of breaking and entering to catch a bigamist: I found myself torn between the legalities of jemmying a window, and the moralities of keeping two women ignorant but happy. Ends and means. It's a daily wrestle with a rickety conscience.

I'm not alone. In this first full year of peace we still have rationing, and rationing brings out the spiv, and the spiv has more customers than he can handle. Who *doesn't* need an extra slice of meat for the kids? Who *isn't* fed up with their car on blocks, when a gallon of black market petrol takes the family to Brighton to put some sea air in their smog-black lungs? The law makes us all criminals. The latest regulations from the pinstripes at the Home Office test our loyalty, and after six years we've had enough. It's about personal survival. We suspended the ten commandments in '39 and it's hard to slip on the strait-jacket again; especially if you felt deserted by God himself.

Occasionally there are diversions. Like the woman I was waiting for. Eve Copeland wasn't the first reporter to take up my time, but I was hoping she had something fresh to offer. Business was sluggish right now, after the flurry of interest a couple of months ago when my face was in all the dailies. Few of the inquiries had turned into jobs. Several just wanted to pick over the entrails. It was getting that I could spot a leech at twenty paces. At least this lady had called the day before to book an appointment. I like that. It makes a change from the people who think that because I leave my office door open and a kettle on top of the filing cabinet, they can use it as a caff.

The little clock on the mantelpiece said ten past nine. She was late. It meant I could tidy my desk and put on my no-nonsense air of busy preoccupation – two seconds. I lit another cigarette to stop my fingers from drumming on the table and I checked the time again; I had one big job prospect – warehouse pilfering – and had to get over to Wapping by noon. Eve Copeland needed to get a move on or she'd miss her chance.

She arrived at my door breathless from the three flights of stairs. She may have sounded businesslike down the wire but the phone is a dangerous invention; you build a picture of a person from a voice, and when you meet them in the flesh it's usually a disappointment. It was the reverse with Miss Copeland. Her voice had said pushy Londoner; her face said I'm the most interesting thing that's come into your life since Johnnie Walker Red Label – quite an achievement, given my relationship with Johnnie.

I should be used to suspending judgement on people, especially pretty women with a business proposition. But I'm a sucker for blatant femininity. Something I'm working on. She strode towards me in a dark green gabardine belted to emphasise a slim waist. A black beret topped her out. She'd just stepped out of one of those sultry French pictures they sometimes show at the Odeon Camberwell Green – watch out for the men in the one-and-nines with raincoats across their laps. I could picture her under a street lamp in Boul' St Michel, a cigarette hanging from her painted mouth and asking for a light.

I got to my feet as she cut up my lino and plonked herself down in my client chair. It creaked with the impact. Not that she was overweight; just a wee bit exuberant for the quality of the furnishings.

"I can help your career," she burst out.

I blinked. "You think this is a career?" I sat down slowly and waved my hand round the tired attic. Brown lino, brown walls, yellow-stained ceiling that sloped on two sides. A desk, a phone, a filing cabinet and a door to my bedroom. And me.

She took in the room and me with a long slow look. "What is it, then? A hobby?"

The diction was street-London, but there was a trace of something else in her voice; like she was hiding a posh accent to fit in. I guessed that her particular gang in Fleet Street didn't wear blue stockings.

"Congratulations, Miss Copeland. It normally takes people at least a couple of days to start questioning my prospects." I made a show of checking my watch. "It took you ten seconds. Do you mind if we start somewhere simpler? Like who you are and why you're here?"

She cocked her head and inspected me for a while. I returned the stare, noting the big features, any one of which would look out of place on an ordinary face but all together on her strong canvas of bones and angles added up to something a little short of beautiful and a little beyond fascination. Strands of chestnut hair spilled from the jaunty beret, a tarpaulin over a briar patch.

"Where are *you* from?" she asked me.

"Isn't my accent a bit of a giveaway?"

She raised her thick eyebrows. "Which *part*?"

"Glasgow. Sort of. Do you always answer questions with a question?"

"Do you always look a gift horse in the mouth?"

I waited. And won – this round.

"I told you on the phone I'm a reporter. I work for the *Trumpet*."

"I don't read the *Trumpet*."

"Why?"

"Too many cartoons."

She coloured. "The words aren't bad, you know!"

"I find better ones in *The Times* crossword. What *can* I do for you?"

I prayed she had a new line. I'd been tripping over journalists since the Caldwell case blew up, each of them trying to get his angle on the story. Not that I could deflect them from what they'd planned to write before they spoke to me. I'd learned in Glasgow in my police days that you could make exactly the same statement to six newshounds, and six different fairytales would appear the next day. A waste of time, but I was prepared to waste a little more of my time just to hold the attention of Eve Copeland, ace reporter, with nice legs.

"I'm looking for a new angle on the Caldwell murders."

I let my forehead fall on to my desk. Then I raised it with a pained look on my face. She was trying not to smile.

"That was January, three months ago. I've seen a hundred theories from you people, none of them based on the facts. There are no new angles. Major Anthony Caldwell was mad as a hatter and took up killing young women because he liked it. End of story."

It wasn't, of course; it was the beginning. But it was all that anyone was going to get out of me. She ignored my theatrics. As I raised my head she had her eyes fixed on the scar across my skull that even my red mop can't hide. She pulled a shorthand notepad from her raincoat pocket and flicked it open. She poised a pencil over the page.

"Do you believe that?"

"I'm not a psychiatrist."

"But you've known a few," she said with a lift of a heavy eyebrow.

"I spent a few months in a loony bin if that's what you mean. All better now." I tapped the trailing end of the scar that terminates just above my left brow, and smiled to signify the end of that little probe.

"That's how we ran the story. Not one of mine." She made it clear how little she thought of her fellow hacks. "I've been reviewing the facts and some things don't add up. I thought there might be a more interesting truth behind it."

"Five murders wasn't interesting enough?"

She stared defiantly at me. The eyes were black olives swimming in milk, and the skin round them was a soft brown with a little fat ridge beneath the lower lids; harem eyes behind the yashmak. "Not in themselves, no. They're just numbers, unless you know something about the murderer's mind, or the victims'. My readers want the inside story, the human story."

"Tell them to read Tit Bits."

"I see we start from rather different views of a newspaper, Mr McRae."

I shrugged. "What didn't add up?"

"Don't tell me you're interested?" She balanced her pad on her lap and raised both hands to her beret. She dug out a pin that had Exhibit A in a murder trial written all over it, wrenched off the cap and shook her hair out. The briar patch exploded. This woman was unscrupulous. She went on, careless of the effect on me.

"It was the sister. Not the Caldwell woman, the upper class one…" She flicked through her pad. "Kate, Kate Graveney."

"What about her?"

"She was… unexpected. I'm good at my job, Mr McRae. Thorough. I do the leg work. My colleagues prefer to sit in the pub and make it up. I go look for myself. And I ask questions. I asked some of the girls in Soho, the working girls. It helps being a woman – at times. They told me that the classy Kate operated a little side business, she was a competitor of theirs offering a service that none of them could – or chose to – provide."

I kept my gaze level and waited. I wondered if she'd met any of the girls from Mama Mary's house. I'd have a word with Mary later.

"You don't seem shocked," she said.

"Nothing much shocks me any more, Miss Copeland. Especially if it's made up."

"So it's not true."

"Even if it were, I imagine if you were to print it you'd be sued till the *Trumpet*'s last blow."

She had the grace to look rueful. "I know, I know. But there's another thing. The word on the street – and I do mean the street – is that Kate also knew about the murders. Maybe even helped. You know what those rich society girls are like."

"'Fraid not. I don't throw enough cocktail parties up here. Maybe I should. What do you think?"

"I think you're covering for this woman, but I don't know why. Love? Sex? A gentleman protecting a lady's reputation?"

"Will that be all, Miss Copeland?" I got to my feet.

"Call me Eve. Can I call you Danny?"

"Call me what you like, Eve. But I have work to do. If you don't mind."

"Wait, wait. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get taken seriously as a woman in this business?" She shoved her hair

back from her face. Her big eyes suddenly lost their certainty. I sat down.

"No, I don't. I guess it's tough. Now all the men are back."

She nodded. "All with their old jobs guaranteed. I don't mind. It's fair enough. But things changed when they were away."

For the first time since she got here she was being sincere.

"It gave me a chance. I took it. I did anything and everything. I even got blown up in an air raid." She reached down and pulled up her skirt. She pointed to a white scar running from her knee and disappearing up her thigh.

"I had my own daily column, for God's sake. Then all the men came home and, bang, I'm back down the ladder. Not all the way. I still do a weekly. But I need to be ten times better than they are to get back to daily. Do you see?"

She was leaning over my desk, longing written across her exotic face. It made her suddenly vulnerable. Then I noticed: the East End accent had gone. Nothing replaced it. I mean she spoke without an accent of any sort.

I nodded. "We all need some breaks, Eve. But the Caldwell case is closed as far as I'm concerned. It's too personal. All tied up in my memory problems and headaches. I don't want to bring them back. Do *you* see?"

Her face took on new purpose. She pulled back. "OK, Danny, let's leave the past. I can't run to a lot of expenses, but what if I could pay you to let me inside?"

"Inside?"

"Your world. Villains and crooks. Fast women and mean men. The underworld. A Cook's tour of the wrong side of the tracks. I want you to introduce me to thieves and murderers. There are clubs I can't get into on my own, unless I change my

profession." She bared a set of even, white fangs. I could imagine them sunk into a story and not letting go.

I stared at her. "You're having me on, aren't you?"

Her soulful eyes glittered with wicked interest. "Take me out on a case."

"Seedy hotels, following Mr and Mrs Smith?"

"You do more than that."

I shook my head. "Was this the career opportunity you had in mind for me?"

"I pay you for information. I write it up and we both do well out of it."

"You make me sound like a copper's nark."

"A man of principle, dispensing justice where the courts fear to tread," she inscribed in mid-air.

I laughed out loud at the image. But then I thought about where next month's rent was coming from. And I thought about being paid for spending more time in her lively company. Who could pass up an offer like that? I should have; I was barely over the last woman in my life, real or imagined. I needed repair time.

"Eve, it's a deal. If anything comes up, I'll give you a call, OK? My rate is twenty pounds a week. Can your paper cover that?"

"Fifteen."

"Eighteen plus expenses."

She nodded and grinned and stretched out a hand. We shook. Like a regular business deal. She crammed her thatch under her beret again and skewered it to her head. I saw her to the door and watched her spiral down the stairs. I would have whistled as I walked back to my desk but it would have echoed after her, and she would have read too much into it.

I thought about the warehouse prospect and wondered if I should have mentioned it. I decided to see how my meeting went this afternoon. Then I might call and let her in on it. And, if I was honest, it wasn't just about the money.