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Brokenclaw

Written by John Gardner

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BROKENCLAW

John Gardner



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DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON

The elderly man wore jeans and a checked shirt. Comfortable Adidas trainers protected his feet and a battered Panama hat was tipped forward to shade his eyes from the afternoon sun. He stretched out in his deck chair, lowered the newspaper he had been reading and looked out at the view which he had come to love.

This, he considered, could well be an English country garden in mid-summer. The long, broad lawn was precisely cut, giving that pleasing *trompe l'œil* effect of broad, perfect stripes in two shades of green. The borders were slashed with crimson salvias, overshadowed by deep purple lupins and nodding hollyhocks. Some sixty yards away from where the man sat, the lawn ended, merging into a rose garden built with a series of trellised archways, giving the effect of a great corridor of colour. In the far distance there were trees, and through a gap you could clearly view the sea stippled with points of sunlight.

The man was only vaguely aware of the sound of a car drawing up outside the house behind him. This was the complete illusion, he thought. Anybody could be forgiven for imagining they were in a summer garden in Surrey or Kent. Only the date on his copy of the *Times Columnist* assured him it was September 25th and he was sitting only a few miles from the city of Victoria on Vancouver Island in British Columbia where, because of its mild climate warmed by the Japanese current, vegetation blooms all the year round.

The main doorbell of the house pierced his pleasant reverie. The maid was away for the day, shopping in downtown Victoria, so he rose, dropping his newspaper, and ambled slowly into the house, grumbling to himself.

‘Professor Allardyce?’ There were two young men, dressed casually in slacks and linen jackets, standing at the front door, their car parked on the gravel sweep in front of the house.

The professor nodded, ‘What can I do for you?’

‘SIS.’ The taller of the duo spoke, and they both lifted their hands to show the laminated cards that identified them as members of the Canadian Security & Intelligence Service.

The professor nodded again; he had reason to know these people, though he had never set eyes on this pair of agents before. ‘Well, what can I do for you?’ he repeated.

‘There’re a couple of problems. The recent business about LORDS . . .’

Allardyce lifted his eyebrows and pursed his lips.

‘Oh, it *is* okay, sir. We’re both LORDS cleared,’ the other agent said quickly.

‘I sincerely hope so,’ the professor frowned. ‘So what’s happened now?’

‘The chief would like to see you,’ said the taller of the two.

‘At the local office,’ the other added. ‘He flew in this morning. Sends his compliments, and asks if you’d do him the honour.’

There was a pause during which Professor Allardyce continued to frown and the two agents shuffled their feet, the taller of the pair undoing the one button on his linen jacket.

‘You mind if I call your local office?’ Allardyce began to turn away as he said it, clearly indicating that he was going to make the call whether they liked it or not.

‘Not a good idea, Prof . . .’ The taller agent stepped forward, spinning the elderly man around while the other man secured his wrists. ‘You’d best just come along with us, right?’

The professor was a thin, somewhat gangling man but he

lashed out with arms and legs so that it took both of the younger men considerable strength to subdue him. Allardyce tried to shout and the taller agent slammed his hand over their captive's mouth, at which the professor promptly bit him.

'Like trying to wrestle an anaconda,' one grunted.

'A sackful of anacondas,' replied the other.

But, gradually, they had their victim under control, dragging him, still kicking, to the car where the bigger agent pushed Allardyce into the rear, chopping the back of his neck viciously with the edge of his hand. The professor folded, slumping into a corner, while his captor climbed in, positioning himself in readiness should the prisoner regain consciousness. With the second man at the wheel the car turned out of the driveway and within a few minutes was on the road leading away from Victoria into wooded countryside.

Professor Robert Allardyce was no fool. At the age of seventy-one he had experienced much, both in his special field of maritime electronics, and in life itself. During World War II he had distinguished himself in the United States Navy, had two ships sunk under him and had been awarded the Navy Cross. He had ended the war in the submarine service, and for a short time during training, before getting his coveted 'Dolphins', Commander Bob Allardyce had been a member of the Navy boxing team.

The chop to his neck had plunged the professor into semi-consciousness, but, by the time the car was out on the main road, he was aware of what was happening. His neck ached from the blow and he figured that it would be stiff and sore if, and when, he tried to move. He remained lying against the nearside door, inert, but with all his senses gradually coming into play again. Far better to feign unconsciousness now and take advantage of the situation later.

They drove for fifteen minutes or so and Allardyce had time to brace himself for a move as the vehicle slowed to a stop.

'They're not here yet,' one of the agents said.

'We're ten minutes ahead of time. Don't get out. Stay where you are.'

'He okay?'

'The prof? Out like a light. He'll stay in dreamland for another half-hour or so.'

As he prepared to move, Allardyce noted that both men spoke more like native Californians than local Canadians. Then he sprang, arching his body, grabbing for the door handle, lashing out with his feet which connected with the body of the man who had hit him. Then he was out of the car and running, hardly realising that he was among trees and undergrowth.

Behind him, there was a shout which sounded like, 'No! No! No!' He did not hear the two shots; just a sudden blinding pain between his shoulder blades and a punch, like some huge fist, which seemed to go right through his body, then a great white light and oblivion.

THE MIND IS THE MAN

Eventually, the autopsy on Robert Allardyce would give cause of death as deep trauma resulting from the spinal chord and left lung being penetrated by two .45 bullets. At the moment those bullets hit the unfortunate professor, James Bond was sitting only some five miles away, in the opulent Palm Court lounge of the Empress Hotel on Victoria's pleasant waterfront.

People who knew Bond well would have noticed that his manner, and expression, were ones of disapproval, his eyes hard and restless, his face frozen into the look of someone who has just been served spoiled fish. In fact Bond was irritated by the way this old and famous hotel served what it called an English Tea. During his four days in Victoria, Bond had avoided taking tea at the hotel, but today he had played two rounds of golf with indifferent partners at the Victoria Golf Club and returned earlier than usual. Tea seemed to be in order and he was shown to a small table right by a massive potted plant.

The first thing that annoyed him was a card on which was printed a highly inaccurate history of what it called The English Tea Ritual. This claimed that, at some time in the late nineteenth century, tea had become a 'serious' meal called High Tea. Happily, Bond reflected that while he could still recall the delights of Nursery Tea, he had never been in a position to eat High Tea, but here he was being asked to believe that the fare set before him *was* High Tea – an indifferent brew of tea itself, strawberries and cream, finger sandwiches, tasteless *petits fours*

and some abomination called a 'honey crumpet'. Crumpets, to Bond, were delicious items which should be served piping hot and dripping with butter, not jam, marmalade or this sweet confection of honey.

He left the meal barely tasted, signed the bill and strolled away past the main restaurant, heading for the foyer. He would take a walk, he thought, along the harbour front which, for some reason, reminded him of Switzerland. Certainly the mountains were far away – in Washington State – but the calm anchorage with its pleasure boats, seaplanes and the juxtaposition of ancient and modern buildings all had a feel of the order one found on the Swiss lakes.

For a moment he stood just outside the main door. It had been a glorious day and the sun was now low and beginning to colour the western sky. A sleek, dark blue Rolls-Royce stood in the turning circle, about thirty yards from the entrance, and a young man, nervous, his head and eyes in constant motion, talked with a uniformed chauffeur at the car's door.

'Excuse me, sir.' One of the grey-uniformed doormen was at Bond's elbow, gently moving him to one side as though someone of great importance was about to leave the hotel. At the same moment, Bond was aware of two men, reeking of 'security', shouldering their way past the doorman and moving to what appeared to be preassigned places near the Rolls. One wore the obligatory earpiece of a bullet-catcher, as professional bodyguards are known the world over, the other sported a long open raincoat of the type favoured by US Secret Service men to hide the Uzi or H & K MP5A2 submachine-guns.

Three more men passed through the door and it was obvious which of them was being protected. Bond did a double take as the striking figure moved towards the Rolls, turning slightly as the nervous young man with the chauffeur came forward to greet him.

So arresting was this man that Bond almost missed the next series of events. The man was well over six feet tall, nearer

six-three or -four, broad-shouldered, erect, and, from the way he moved, in very good physical shape. You could practically see the muscles ripple under the expensive, meticulously tailored double-breasted grey suit. His face was even more remarkable than his physique: – dark, almost olive-skinned, with a broad forehead, fine flared nose and a mouth that could have been perfectly sculpted by an artist – thick, sensual lips, but which were in flawless proportion to the rest of the face. The bone structure, Bond thought, was almost that of a pure-blooded American Indian; only the dark brown eyes gave the lie to this, for they were slightly almond-shaped and hooded, hinting at some Oriental blood. Certainly, whoever he was, this fine-looking specimen could never be forgotten.

The nervous young man had been speaking to him, rapidly and low, the tall one's tranquil face taking on an expression of concern as he listened, bending slightly from the waist so that he could hear without causing the speaker to raise his voice.

The pair were now very close to the Rolls and Bond had a full view of both faces. He began to read the young man's lips only as he completed his short speech.

' . . . and they say he's dead,' he seemed to say.

'The idiots shot him?' The tall one's lips undoubtedly formed the pattern of this rather shocked question.

The younger man nodded and mouthed, 'They said they aimed low . . . but . . .'

The imposing figure raised a hand. 'I'll see to them later.' His face seemed for a second contorted in fury. 'Tell them incalculable damage may have been done regarding Lords.'

The art of lip-reading had been added to Bond's armoury some time ago. While in a Hong Kong hospital, recovering after a particularly dangerous mission, he had been instructed in the rudiments of the art by a girl called Ebbie Heritage. It would be a long time before he would forget that young woman. She had taught him well, and now, for the first time, James Bond had actually put this art to the test. He was willing to swear in a court

of law that the tall VIP had spoken of some recent death and the possibility of this act being the cause of irreparable damage to some scheme.

By the time he had digested what he had learned, the main subject of his attention was already in the Rolls, together with his bodyguards, and the vehicle was slowly moving from the front of the hotel.

He turned to one of the doormen. 'Who's the imposing gentleman in the Rolls?' he asked.

The doorman gave a thin smile. 'Mr Lee, sir. That was the famous Mr Lee. He's on his way to make a very special presentation at the Museum of British Columbia across the road there.' He pointed to the far left of the hotel.

Bond nodded his thanks and strolled out towards the waterfront, making a left turn on Government Street, walking quickly towards the point where it bisected Belleville, heading towards the Museum of British Columbia, which he had visited, with great interest, only two days previously. The huge and elegant presence of Mr Lee, as the doorman had called him, had somehow fascinated Bond to the extent that he wished to know more about the man.

The Empress Hotel occupies an entire block between Government and Douglas Streets, its furthest boundary being Belleville Road. On Belleville, the next block is almost completely taken up by the beautifully spacious, modern museum.

Bond glanced around him, not appearing to be in any kind of hurry, as he walked the last few yards towards the museum. Away to his right the statue of Queen Victoria stood, unamused, before the large domed Government building.

He paused by the pedestrian crossing, waiting for the lights to change, looking at the large angular museum building, flanked by a modern carillon and Thunderbird Park with its gaudy, tall totems. In his mind, Bond could hear his old Scottish housekeeper, May, cluck-clucking, 'The trouble with you, Mr James, is that you're always sticking your nose into things that don't

concern you. Curiosity killed the cat, you know.’ But he *was* curious, fascinated and intrigued by this large man he had only seen for a few moments. For the first time in months, James Bond was interested in something.

The Rolls was parked at the side of the large building, close to the museum shop and entrance, its chauffeur leaning against the front passenger door. Bond strolled past the shop, then ruffled his hair and went into the main entrance at a jog. There was a line of a dozen people or so waiting to pass the ticket booth, so he shouldered his way through them, beckoning to a uniformed attendant.

‘I’m late,’ he said, looking frantic. ‘Should be with Mr Lee.’

The porter took the bait, ‘Right, sir. They’re all up in the Art Gallery. Third floor.’ He held a couple of people back to allow Bond to move through.

He remembered the third floor from his previous visit – exhibits of the first inhabitants of this land. Wonderful lifesize representations of American Indian coastal chiefs and headmen; a magnificently detailed model of a Kootenai village; another of a Sedan coastal village, together with artifacts from the old Indian tribes who were the first organised humans to dwell in the area; tools, artworks, canoes, masks and woven garments, the whole presenting the lives of these ancient peoples set in harmony with the environment.

He ran up the escalators to the third floor, making his way past the glass cases and cunningly lit exhibits, turning right, slowing as he entered the large reproduction of a Kwakiutl Indian Big House, made of great beams and seasoned planks. Part of the roof was open to what appeared to be the sky; there was the smell of woodsmoke which drifted from a realistic fire in the centre, while two giant thunderbird totems towered above everything. Their wooden wings were outstretched and the carved faces with long aggressive beaks looked as though they might come alive, attacking, ripping and tearing at anyone who threatened those under their protection. From somewhere,

hidden within this large room, came the sound of Indian chants and the steady thud of tom-toms made the short hairs on the back of his neck stiffen.

Quietly he moved on through the Big House which opened up into the Art Gallery containing more beautifully carved totems, bearing crests, faces, entwined snakes and the figureheads of a myriad supernatural beings which guarded and cared for homes and villages.

A semicircle of people was gathered around a weathered, intricately worked, tall totem with two stubby wings near the top.

Bond moved quietly into this little group of people, his eyes searching faces until he found Lee standing at the base of the totem, his bodyguards behind him. A small aesthetic-looking man, wearing pince-nez on a nose that appeared too big for his face, was speaking, and Bond noticed that Lee seemed to have shrunk, as though he could disguise his size and dominating presence. It was almost a theatrical trick, as if the man could disappear into the crowd in spite of his commanding bearing. But it worked. By rights everyone's eyes should have been on Lee, but the people gathered for whatever this ceremony represented, looked at and listened attentively to the speaker, who was obviously one of the senior curators, or a member of the museum's board.

'This generous act,' the official was saying, 'is typical of the great benevolence Mr Lee has shown to the various communities of Vancouver Island. It is a selfless gesture, to give – not lend – this ancient totem to the museum, a totem that has been connected with his family for the best part of a century. We are grateful, and only wish that Mr Lee could live permanently among us. Though, as you know, he maintains a property on the island, his business interests in the United States and in Europe allow him to be with us all too rarely. But he is here today, and I am going to ask him to say a few words to us before we take this valuable carving under our care. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr Lee Fu-Chu.'

So, Bond thought, that was it. Lee was some kind of half-breed, part Chinese and part . . . what? Before he could even think about it, he saw Lee go through an amazing transformation. Until that moment, this giant of a man had been almost a bystander, now he straightened and came forward, drawn up to his full height, his left arm straight with the hand balled behind his left thigh, the right hand making a gesture towards the official who had been speaking. His head was held high, almost arrogantly, the large brown eyes twinkled with charm and his wide mouth parted to show perfect teeth and a smile of genuine delight. He shook hands with the official then turned, his eyes sweeping around the gathered crowd as though taking each of them into his confidence. His voice was mellow, soft and elegant with no trace of any accent, neither American nor Canadian. Lee spoke in almost perfect English, with no blemish culled from any particular education. He had neither the overstated drawl of what used to be called an Oxford accent, nor any hint of mispronunciation which would reveal his English to be a second language.

‘My good friends,’ he began, and Bond felt that he meant it, that every person there was a good and known friend. ‘It is always a pleasure to be here in British Columbia, if only because BC is my heritage. I return here from time to time to remind myself of that great heritage. Many of you already know the story of my birthright, part of which I have today passed on to this museum. Whether you’ve heard it or not, I feel obliged to tell the tale once more. For the record, as it were.’ The eyes glittered with elation, his voice dropped slightly as though he were passing on a long lost treasure, a secret, to those gathered around him.

The story he had to tell was fascinating – how, in the 1840s, at the time of the Gold Rush, his great-grandfather had come to British Columbia from the Shanxi Province of China, where he had traded in gold. This man had been captured by a war party of Crow Indians who held him hostage, and during that period

he had fallen in love with a beautiful Crow girl called Running Elk.

Eventually, the couple had escaped and sought refuge with a band of Piegan Blackfoot Indians. There, among this tribe, they were accepted, made of one blood with the Blackfoot people, and were married.

This marriage of a Chinese dealer in precious metals and a Crow woman began Lee's ancestry, for the strain of Chinese and Blackfoot Indian had been carried through three generations. Lee, himself, had been brought up in both traditions by his parents, Flying Eagle Lee and Winter Woman.

Bond thought that the man had an almost hypnotic power, for, though he told his tale simply, without wasting words, the very fluency seemed to bring the story to life. When he used the anglicised Indian names – Running Elk, Flying Eagle, Winter Woman and the like – the words required no further description, but almost took on flesh and became living humans. It was the kind of trick that the ancient market story-tellers must have possessed as they charmed their listeners with fables and legends. Lee was still speaking, allowing himself a broad smile as he said, 'To be truthful, there are times when I don't know whether I should be inscrutable and mysterious or play the noble savage.' This brought an appreciative laugh in which Lee himself joined before becoming solemn again.

'The totem I have given you today stood before my grandfather's and my father's teepees. I know it like an old friend. I played at its base as an infant; I looked upon it as a sacred object while I was with the other braves at rituals and ceremonies. It has power and a long memory within its wooden being. So guard it and keep it well.'

The applause was genuinely warm, but Lee held up his right hand for silence. 'I have heard it said,' an almost conspiratorial smile crossing his face, 'that I am a fraud; that I have invented these stories; that I am nothing more than the child of some itinerant Chinese tailor and a Blackfoot girl who sold her body

in Fort Benton. None of this is true. Come to me and I have written proof. Ask, when you go to the Blackfoot reservations, of Brokenclaw, for that is also my inheritance.' He drew his left hand from behind his thigh and held both arms out, hands with palms upwards.

For a second Bond did not see the truth, then he realised that Lee's left hand, palm open, had his thumb on the right side. His left hand was his one physical blemish, as though, at conception, the hand had grown from the wrist the wrong way round, so that with palms outstretched the thumb was to the right; when the palms faced down, the thumb was on the left.

The group applauded again and the gathering started to break up. The last Bond saw of Brokenclaw Lee was his head and shoulders above a group heading towards the escalators.

Bond stayed for a while, viewing the ancient totem with its symbols of snake, bird and, he thought, scales for weighing, not justice, but gold. The longer he looked, the more he saw – strange, even grotesque, faces peering out from carved leaves and branches.

Finally, with a smile, Bond turned and left, walking back through the Indian Big House, the short hairs on the back of his neck once again stiffening at the sound of the chanting and rhythm of the tom-tom beat.

This had been a strange, and somehow exciting, diversion – to see someone as charismatic as Lee and hear his story which could well be a trunk full of rubbish. It was, though, he reflected, walking back to the Empress, the first time in nearly a year that he had become engrossed in something outside himself.

This hybrid man, Lee, had everything – presence, power, shrewdness, strength, charisma, charm and obvious success. He would be an ideal exercise, Bond thought. While he was here in British Columbia, he would spend some time trying to discover where Lee had found his success, and what was the true secret of his power. It should not be difficult, with somebody as accomplished as this.

But when he returned to his hotel room, Bond found things had changed rapidly. The message light was blinking on the telephone. A cable had arrived from the United States, he was told, and five minutes later he read the message—

TROUBLE OVER YOUR SHARES IN THE FAMILY BUSINESS
 STOP IMPERATIVE YOU COME TO SAN FRANCISCO IM-
 MEDIATELY STOP ROOM RESERVED FOR YOU AT FAIRMONT
 HOTEL STOP PLEASE WAIT THERE FOR MESSAGE STOP
 REGARDS MANDARIN

So, Bond thought, as he crumpled the flimsy paper, the old man had him marked down for some job in California from the start. He recalled M's words to him, less than two weeks before – 'You need to get away for a rest, James. Go off to California. They're all mad there, so you'll be in good company.'

The old fraud, he thought. Then he smiled and picked up the telephone to book himself on to the first available flight to San Francisco. In fewer than fourteen days his world had changed, but at least his mind had been sharpened back to some kind of normality. Strange how that could happen by seeing and hearing a man whose path he would probably never cross again. A couple of weeks before, his mind had been as blunt as a rusty old axe and his whole being had seemed to be deserted by any shape or form.

An old saying came back to him without bidding – 'The mind of every man *is* the man: the spirit of the miser, the mind of a drunkard . . . they are more precious to them than life itself.'

How true, he thought. His mind, the mind of an adventurer, had been lost to him and now was refound. More precious to him than life itself.