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Opening Extract from...

You'd Better Believe It

Written by Bill James

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You'd Better Believe It

Bill James



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1

He was shopping for another marksman, someone for that nice, comfortable, fourth seat in the back of his car, someone who would also stay close and do a tidy job when they were out of the car and sprinting towards a double barrel. It would be soon: the word was about. Harpur could be choosy. Wasn't it a privilege to work with him and get shot at with him? Police boredom was beautiful. Men offered themselves for tricky outings to break the dullness.

A few people, some of them sharp, said he ought to think about Brian Avery, so he thought about him. Avery was a promising cop, and Mrs Avery had promise too. These team things could push you into contact with a man's wife and family. A good team grew very close, met in one another's houses not just the nick, did a lot of their drinking together, and brought their women to some sessions. He would be glad of a route to Mrs Avery, and if he picked Brian it would be there. Avery had commendations, one or two of them very strong stuff. His shooting was tournament standard, at least with pistols. He looked right -- alert, nimble, solid, big but not so fleshy big that as soon as he turned up anywhere in a suit people asked his number. Alert? Alert, or edgy? Avery was on the short list so Harpur had watched him the last couple of days in the club bar and still couldn't make up his mind whether what glinted there added up to brightness or panic. The dossier had nothing to show he might crack. The folk Harpur talked to had worked with Avery or had had him under their orders, and they all admired the man and trusted him, said he had a future. Wasn't it all irresistible?

Harpur arranged to do some shooting on the range when Avery was there, though not to see whether he could hit bull's-eyes. Harpur knew the answer to that: Avery had prizes. But Harpur needed to see that he took care. Since the shooting of Steven Waldorf, the world was ready to drop like ten tons of newsprint on any error with a gun by British policemen.

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Prone and standing, Harpur shot well this morning with the .38, fifteen out of seventeen and fourteen out of seventeen. Avery who came after him had a maximum on each with the .38, and then did it with a .45. The new firearms sensitivity had brought an extension to the range, imported from the States, and Harpur went there next, the .38 in his hand. It always made him think of one of those grottoes for kids at Christmas in big toy departments. You walked a mock-up London street, with plywood façades of corner shops, warehouses, a pub, a filling station. It looked like somewhere in dockland. As you trod the timed route, dummy figures swung up suddenly at spots in the urban battleground and threatened you – or didn't. The test was to identify the figure fast and fire or hold your fire, whichever was right. One figure had a shot-gun, another an Armalite. They could pop up anywhere, like in life itself, and you ought to have a shot, or two shots, smack into their dotted-line hearts within a couple of seconds. No need to shout the rigmarole warning; that was deemed to have been given earlier. Speed was the thing, controlled speed. A woman carrying a baby, a police sergeant in uniform, and a milkman on his rounds could also jump into view, and it was considered poor form to drill any of these, especially the baby. For one shot in a good soul you lost points, and for two your whole score disappeared. Reasonable enough. That was the British – in the States they probably just docked you a half for a chamberful in any of them, baby included.

Harpur went through pretty quickly today. He had done it five times before and although they shuffled the locations for these enemies, friends, and innocents, he felt on top of things, swift to the kill, though not too swift. And he did knock over the villains in good time with shots that were not all in the heart but spread over a decent rectangle between neck and navel. The pity was that he also shot the sergeant, a bullet very high in the right shoulder, almost a miss because the moment he fired he knew he had it wrong and tried to swing the pistol up and away. After the penalty, he came out eleven from a possible fifteen; poorish. It was not the first time he had shot the wooden sergeant. 'He after your job, sir?' the inspector who did the scores asked.

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Harpur watched Avery do another perfect round in two seconds less than his own.

In the afternoon he sent for Avery. 'I'm getting together a group for a job that could be coming up, Brian.'

'I thought you'd never ask, sir.'

A couple of nights later they all assembled in Harpur's house with their women, and Megan did some food and helped keep the talk easy and general. This was social only, a dose of *esprit de corps*, not tactical planning. The women would not be in on that. He was able to talk a little with Ruth Avery, nothing rushed, nothing noticeable. She said Brian was grateful to have been chosen, and seemed to share the excitement. That would do as a start. He spoke well of Brian, but not so well that she might come to think he was the only man worth talking about. She was smart, a little heavy, cheerful-looking and about five years younger than Harpur, the kind of brassy girl he occasionally found himself gazing at with appetite these days. Appetite he did not signal tonight in the presence of spouses.

2

Briefings – Christ, what a laugh! Sketch maps, photos, coloured chalk, so picturesque. And the chat that went with them, calm and organized to make things sound all buttoned up. On the job, though, there could be fright, collapse, those unaccountable sudden dives into stupidity. Listening to briefings or giving them himself, Harpur occasionally wanted to slink from the room and find something real. He never did. These lecturettes had to be done because the geography of a street and the geography of a face might be vital. Just the same, boredom doused him like a bucket of slops as soon as a session began. Talky, talky. Now, he brought his own talking to an end, turned away from the blackboard and sat down. ‘One thing more. Eight of us will be armed, standard issue .38s.’ For what followed he tried to eliminate all mockery from his voice. ‘I remind you that handguns will be drawn from the holster only if you believe, and reasonably believe, your life is threatened. In this event, you are to shout a warning, “Armed police”, if possible more than once. If you fire, it will be at one of the specified targets, not at the tyres of vehicles or anything else. There have been recent accidents. You may have heard.’

Morning sun, mild and kindly, glazed the leaves of street beeches and made film titles over the ABC shimmer winningly, *Plague*, *Children For Sale*, *Don't Forget The Foreplay*.

‘All little known early works of D. W. Griffith,’ Leo Peters said.

Two huge seagulls patrolled Woolworth's parapet, screeching now and then across the rattle of traffic. A good-natured breeze nudged the beech branches and their shadows swirled and eddied on the pavement – a delightful sight, Harpur thought. Delightful? Who was he, for God's sake, Cecil Beaton?

Behind him in the unmarked Granada, Leo Peters hummed a fine

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tune. Alongside Leo, Brian Avery chewed gum. It sounded a bit too fast. Next to Harpur, Chris, the driver also chewed but without the rush. 'What's the song, Leo?' Chris asked.

Leo moved from humming into words and sang: *'That we may build from age to age an undefiled heritage.'*

'Some chance,' Chris said.

'It's "Land of our birth we pledge to thee",' Leo told him.

The driver seemed to see something and his hand moved to the starter. Except for Avery's chewing, even faster now, they all grew silent. 'No, not them,' Chris said, and his hand went back to the wheel.

Over the ABC thin, very white cloud stretched across the bright blue of the June sky like an unrolled bandage. One of the gulls sidled urgently along the parapet, cried once more, its body taut, and then in a great gleam of white spread its wings and flew down the street and away.

'I think its proper title is "The Children's Song",' Leo said, humming again.

'Who cares?' Avery muttered.

Leo recited: *'Land of our birth, our faith, our pride, For whose dear sake our fathers died; O Motherland, we pledge to thee – Di da di da di da di da.'*

'Head, heart and hand, through the years to be,' Harpur said. 'Did that at school.'

'That's it, sir,' Leo exclaimed.

Avery said, 'Jesus, I'm getting jumpy; I mean, not knowing whether they'll show. Only the waiting.'

'You don't look a bit jumpy,' Harpur said, turning. 'Like a rock.'

'Yes,' Chris said, 'calm as the doldrums. I don't know how you do it.'

'Only five of the sods, Brian,' Harpur told him. 'I've got twenty good lads spread around here, including the other sharpshooters. And more units on call.'

Chris tensed again, and leaned towards the starter, and again did not complete the move. 'It's me who's jumpy.'

A couple of girls on a day off sauntered towards the shops and paused near the Granada, obscuring Harpur's view of the bank. The girls bent to look in.

'Wow,' Harpur murmured.

'I know one of them.' Leo sounded apologetic. The girls smiled.

'Nice,' Harpur commented. 'Both. This town has the best.'

'Get them away from here, for God's sake,' Avery said. 'It's time.'

'Not quite,' Chris told him. 'No harm.'

Peters wound down the rear window.

'After pick-ups as usual, Leo?' one of the girls asked.

'Melanie, you're looking great.'

'You working or something, Leo?'

'Sort of, yes.'

'What the fuck does she think?' Avery gabbled it, needing to chew even as he spoke, but the girl caught his tone and looked troubled.

'Cheery fellow you got there, Leo.'

'Summer sales, ladies?' Harpur asked. He shifted slightly so as to see Lloyds again.

'Oh, who's your interesting friend, Leo?' the other girl said, glancing at Harpur.

'Look, push off girls, will you?' Avery said.

He could be right about himself: a lot of men who were top warriors once things started could not put up with waiting. In a few minutes Avery would be somebody different. Harpur was sure of it.

'I'll see you some time. I'll call you,' Peters told the girl.

'I bet!'

'I will.'

'Christ, he will,' Brian Avery said. 'Now get lost.'

'See you, girls,' Harpur called. 'Well, it ought to be getting close.' His information went only so far. Of course. It said the number of men, and named four of them, it said the time. It did not say what vehicle or vehicles to look for. It said armament, but not what kind. You had to expect shot-guns on this sort of job, though. Information might be right when it started but could turn wrong because people changed their plans. Leaks could go two ways. 'We'll give it an hour.'

'They'll all be at home in Peckham having a giggle,' Avery said, 'thinking of us sitting here sweating.'

'Could be,' Harpur replied.

'Not that I'm sweating.'

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'Me, yes, a bit. Sorry men,' Peters said.

'Your nark, sir – is he . . .?' Avery began.

'Solid.' Jack Lamb had never been wrong, or never as wrong as this. Harpur knew no grass to come near him. He and Jack Lamb: it was a partnership, risky, secret, close, that ancient replica of a marriage of convenience, a cop and his tipster.

'Can we risk the radio?' Peters asked. 'Let the others know we're sitting tight, never mind the time, and they're to do the same?'

'Best not.' In fact he waited above an hour. Towards the end, Brian Avery's chewing grew almost relaxed. Nothing was going to happen today. Harpur broke the silence and told the other cars it was a dud. '*Mea culpa*, lads.'

'You what?' Chris asked.

'Pity. I was looking forward to it,' Avery remarked, as the Granada made for the nick. 'Kick your nark's arse, sir, if he hasn't scarpered. Promising us a nice caper like that. Hope you didn't give him anything in advance. But maybe it's only a postponement. We might get another go at the bastards.'

'They'll come.'