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ROBERT
GALBRAITH
***TROUBLED
BLOOD***

A *STRIKE* NOVEL

sphere

S P H E R E

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To Barbara Murray,
social worker, WEA worker, teacher,
wife, mother, grandmother,
demon bridge player
and
world's best mother-in-law

*There they her sought, and euery where inquired,
Where they might tydings get of her estate;
Yet found they none. But by what haplesse fate,
Or hard misfortune she was thence conuayd,
And stolne away from her beloued mate,
Were long to tell . . .*

Edmund Spenser
The Faerie Queene

*For, if it were not so, there would be something disappearing
into nothing, which is mathematically absurd.*

Aleister Crowley
The Book of Thoth

PART ONE

Then came the iolly Sommer . . .

Edmund Spenser
The Faerie Queene

*And such was he, of whom I haue to tell,
The champion of true Iustice, Artegall . . .*

Edmund Spenser
The Faerie Queene

‘You’re a Cornishman, born and bred,’ said Dave Polworth irritably. ‘“Strike” isn’t even your proper name. By rights, you’re a Nancarrow. You’re not going to sit here and say you’d call yourself English?’

The Victory Inn was so crowded on this warm August evening that drinkers had spilled outside onto the broad stone steps which led down to the bay. Polworth and Strike were sitting at a table in the corner, having a few pints to celebrate Polworth’s thirty-ninth birthday. Cornish nationalism had been under discussion for twenty minutes, and to Strike it felt much longer.

‘Would I call myself English?’ he mused aloud. ‘No, I’d probably say British.’

‘Fuck off,’ said Polworth, his quick temper rising. ‘You wouldn’t. You’re just trying to wind me up.’

The two friends were physical opposites. Polworth was short and spare as a jockey, weathered and prematurely lined, his sunburned scalp visible through his thinning hair. His T-shirt was crumpled, as though he had pulled it off the floor or out of a washing basket, and his jeans were ripped. On his left forearm was tattooed the black and white cross of St Piran; on his right hand was a deep scar, souvenir of a close encounter with a shark.

His friend Strike resembled an out-of-condition boxer, which

in fact he was; a large man, well over six feet tall, with a slightly crooked nose, his dense dark hair curly. He bore no tattoos and, in spite of the perpetual shadow of the heavy beard, carried about him that well-pressed and fundamentally clean-cut air that suggested ex-police or ex-military.

‘You were born here,’ Polworth persisted. ‘So you’re Cornish.’

‘Trouble is, by that standard, you’re a Brummie.’

‘Fuck off!’ yelled Polworth again, genuinely stung. ‘I’ve been here since I was two months old and my mum’s a Trevelyan. It’s identity – what you feel here,’ and Polworth thumped his chest over his heart. ‘My mum’s family goes back centuries in Cornwall—’

‘Yeah, well, blood and soil’s never been my—’

‘Did you hear about the last survey they done?’ said Polworth, talking over Strike. “‘What’s your ethnic origin?’ they asked, and half – *half* – ticked “Cornish” instead of “English”. Massive increase.’

‘Great,’ said Strike. ‘What next? Boxes for Dumnonos and Romans?’

‘Keep using that patronising fucking tone,’ said Polworth, ‘and see where it gets you. You’ve been in London too fucking long, boy . . . There’s nothing wrong with being proud of where you came from. Nothing wrong with communities wanting some power back from Westminster. The Scots are gonna lead the way, next year. You watch. When they get independence, that’ll be the trigger. Celtic peoples right across the country are going to make their move.’

‘Want another one?’ he added, gesturing towards Strike’s empty pint glass.

Strike had come out to the pub craving a respite from tension and worry, not to be harangued about Cornish politics. Polworth’s allegiance to Mebyon Kernow, the nationalist party he’d joined at sixteen, appeared to have gained a greater hold over him in the year or so since they had last seen each other. Dave usually made Strike laugh like almost nobody else, but he brooked no jokes upon Cornish independence, a subject that for Strike had all the appeal of soft furnishings or train-spotting. For a second Strike considered saying that he needed to get back to his aunt’s house, but the prospect of that was almost more depressing than his old friend’s invective against

supermarkets that resisted putting the cross of St Piran on goods of Cornish origin.

‘Great, thanks,’ he said, passing his empty glass to Dave, who headed up to the bar, nodding left and right to his many acquaintances.

Left alone at the table, Strike’s eyes roamed absently over the pub he’d always considered his local. It had changed over the years, but was still recognisably the place in which he and his Cornish mates had met in their late teens. He had an odd double impression of being exactly where he belonged, and where he’d never belonged, of intense familiarity and of separateness.

As his gaze moved aimlessly from timber floor to nautical prints, Strike found himself looking directly into the large, anxious eyes of a woman standing at the bar with a friend. She had a long, pale face and her dark, shoulder-length hair was streaked with grey. He didn’t recognise her, but he’d been aware for the past hour that certain locals were craning their necks to look at him, or else trying to catch his eye. Looking away, Strike took out his mobile and pretended to be texting.

Acquaintances had a ready excuse for conversation, if he showed the slightest sign of encouraging them, because everyone in St Mawes seemed to know that his aunt Joan had received a diagnosis of advanced ovarian cancer ten days previously, and that he, his half-sister, Lucy, and Lucy’s three sons had hastened at once to Joan and Ted’s house to offer what support they could. For a week now he’d been fielding enquiries, accepting sympathy and politely declining offers of help every time he ventured out of the house. He was tired of finding fresh ways of saying ‘Yes, it looks terminal and yes, it’s shit for all of us.’

Polworth pushed his way back to the table, carrying two fresh pints. ‘There you go, Diddy,’ he said, resuming his bar stool.

The old nickname hadn’t been bestowed, as most people assumed, in ironic reference to Strike’s size, but derived from ‘didicoy’, the Cornish word for gypsy. The sound of it softened Strike, reminding him why his friendship with Polworth was the most enduring of his life.

Thirty-five years previously, Strike had entered St Mawes Primary

School a term late, unusually large for his age and with an accent that was glaringly different from the local burr. Although he'd been born in Cornwall, his mother had spirited him away as soon as she'd recovered from the birth, fleeing into the night, baby in her arms, back to the London life she loved, flitting from flat to squat to party. Four years after Strike's birth, she'd returned to St Mawes with her son and with her newborn, Lucy, only to take off again in the early hours of the morning, leaving Strike and his half-sister behind.

Precisely what Leda had said in the note she left on the kitchen table, Strike had never known. Doubtless she'd been having a spell of difficulty with a landlord or a boyfriend, or perhaps there was a music festival she particularly wanted to attend: it became difficult to live exactly as she pleased with two children in tow. Whatever the reason for her lengthening absence, Leda's sister-in-law, Joan, who was as conventional and orderly as Leda was flighty and chaotic, had bought Strike a uniform and enrolled him in the local school.

The other four-and-a-half-year-olds had gawped when he was introduced to the class. A few of them giggled when the teacher said his first name, Cormoran. He was worried by this school business, because he was sure that his mum had said she was going to 'home school' him. He'd tried to tell Uncle Ted that he didn't think his mum would want him to go, but Ted, normally so understanding, had said firmly that he had to, so there he was, alone among strangers with funny accents. Strike, who'd never been a great crier, had sat down at the old roll-top desk with a lump like an apple in his throat.

Why Dave Polworth, pocket don of the class, had decided to befriend the new boy had never been satisfactorily explained, even to Strike. It couldn't have been out of fear of Strike's size, because Dave's two best friends were hefty fishermen's sons, and Dave was in any case notorious as a fighter whose viciousness was inversely proportional to his height. By the end of that first day Polworth had become both friend and champion, making it his business to impress upon their classmates all the reasons that Strike was worthy of their respect: he was a Cornishman born, a nephew to Ted Nancarrow of

the local lifeguard, he didn't know where his mum was and it wasn't his fault if he spoke funny.

Ill as Strike's aunt was, much as she had enjoyed having her nephew to stay for a whole week and even though he'd be leaving the following morning, Joan had virtually pushed him out of the house to celebrate 'Little Dave's' birthday that evening. She placed immense value on old ties and delighted in the fact that Strike and Dave Polworth were still mates, all these years later. Joan counted the fact of their friendship as proof that she'd been right to send him to school over his feckless mother's wishes and proof that Cornwall was Strike's true home, no matter how widely he might have wandered since, and even though he was currently London-based.

Polworth took a long pull on his fourth pint and said, with a sharp glance over his shoulder at the dark woman and her blonde friend, who were still watching Strike,

'Effing emmets.'

'And where would your garden be,' asked Strike, 'without tourists?'

'Be ansom,' said Polworth promptly. 'We get a ton of local visitors, plenty of repeat business.'

Polworth had recently resigned from a managerial position in an engineering firm in Bristol to work as head gardener in a large public garden a short distance along the coast. A qualified diver, an accomplished surfer, a competitor in Ironman competitions, Polworth had been relentlessly physical and restless since childhood, and time and office work hadn't tamed him.

'No regrets, then?' Strike asked.

'Fuck, no,' said Polworth fervently. 'Needed to get my hands dirty again. Need to get back outside. Forty next year. Now or never.'

Polworth had applied for the new job without telling his wife what he was doing. Having been offered the position, he'd quit his job and gone home to announce the fait accompli to his family.

'Penny come round, has she?' Strike asked.

'Still tells me once a week she wants a divorce,' Polworth answered indifferently. 'But it was better to present her with the fact, than argue the toss for five years. It's all worked out great. Kids love the new school, Penny's company let her transfer to the office in the Big

City', by which Polworth meant Truro, not London. 'She's happy. Just doesn't want to admit it.'

Strike privately doubted the truth of this statement. A disregard for inconvenient facts tended to march hand in hand with Polworth's love of risk and romantic causes. However, Strike had problems enough of his own without worrying about Polworth's, so he raised his fresh pint and said, hoping to keep Polworth's mind off politics:

'Well, many happy returns, mate.'

'Cheers,' said Polworth, toasting him back. 'What d'you reckon to Arsenal's chances, then? Gonna qualify?'

Strike shrugged, because he feared that discussing the likelihood of his London football club securing a place in the Champions League would lead back to a lack of Cornish loyalties.

'How's your love life?' Polworth asked, trying a different tack.

'Non-existent,' said Strike.

Polworth grinned.

'Joanie reckons you're gonna end up with your business partner. That Robin girl.'

'Is that right?' said Strike.

'Told me all about it when I was round there, weekend before last. While I was fixing their Sky Box.'

'They didn't tell me you'd done that,' said Strike, again tipping his pint towards Polworth. 'That was good of you, mate, cheers.'

If he'd hoped to deflect his friend, he was unsuccessful.

'Both of 'em. Her and Ted,' said Polworth, 'both of 'em reckon it's Robin.'

And when Strike said nothing, Polworth pressed him, 'Nothing going on, then?'

'No,' said Strike.

'How come?' asked Polworth, frowning again. As with Cornish independence, Strike was refusing to embrace an obvious and desirable objective. 'She's a looker. Seen her in the paper. Maybe not on a par with Milady Berserko,' Polworth acknowledged. It was the nickname he had long ago bestowed on Strike's ex-fiancée. 'But on the other hand, she's not a fucking nutcase, is she, Diddy?'

Strike laughed.

Troubled Blood

'Lucy likes her,' said Polworth. 'Says you'd be perfect together.'

'When were you talking to Lucy about my love life?' asked Strike, with a touch less complaisance.

'Month or so ago,' said Polworth. 'She brought her boys down for the weekend and we had them all over for a barbecue.'

Strike drank and said nothing.

'You get on great, she says,' said Polworth, watching him.

'Yeah, we do,' said Strike.

Polworth waited, eyebrows raised and looking expectant.

'It'd fuck everything up,' said Strike. 'I'm not risking the agency.'

'Right,' said Polworth. 'Tempted, though?'

There was a short pause. Strike carefully kept his gaze averted from the dark woman and her companion, who he was sure were discussing him.

'There might've been moments,' he admitted, 'when it crossed my mind. But she's going through a nasty divorce, we spend half our lives together as it is and I like having her as a business partner.'

Given their longstanding friendship, the fact that they'd already clashed over politics and that it was Polworth's birthday, he was trying not to let any hint of resentment at this line of questioning show. Every married person he knew seemed desperate to chivvy others into matrimony, no matter how poor an advertisement they themselves were for the institution. The Polworths, for instance, seemed to exist in a permanent state of mutual animosity. Strike had more often heard Penny refer to her husband as 'that twat' than by his name, and many was the night when Polworth had regaled his friends in happy detail of the ways in which he'd managed to pursue his own ambitions and interests at the expense of, or over the protests of, his wife. Both seemed happiest and most relaxed in the company of their own sex, and on those rare occasions when Strike had enjoyed hospitality at their home, the gatherings always seemed to follow a pattern of natural segregation, the women congregating in one area of the home, the men in another.

'And what happens when Robin wants kids?' asked Polworth.

‘Don’t think she’s does,’ said Strike. ‘She likes the job.’

‘They all say that,’ said Polworth dismissively. ‘What age is she now?’

‘Ten years younger than us.’

‘She’ll want kids,’ said Polworth confidently. ‘They all do. And it happens quicker for women. They’re up against the clock.’

‘Well, she won’t be getting kids with me. I don’t want them. Anyway, the older I get, the less I think I’m the marrying kind.’

‘Thought that myself, mate,’ said Polworth. ‘But then I realised I’d got it all wrong. Told you how it happened, didn’t I? How I ended up proposing to Penny?’

‘Don’t think so,’ said Strike.

‘I never told you about the whole Tolstoy thing?’ asked Polworth, surprised at this omission.

Strike, who’d been about to drink, lowered his glass in amazement. Since primary school, Polworth, who had a razor-sharp intelligence but despised any form of learning he couldn’t put to immediate, practical use, had shunned all printed material except technical manuals. Misinterpreting Strike’s expression, Polworth said,

‘Tolstoy. He’s a writer.’

‘Yeah,’ said Strike. ‘Thanks. How does Tolstoy—?’

‘Telling you, aren’t I? I’d split up with Penny the second time. She’d been banging on about getting engaged, and I wasn’t feeling it. So I’m in this bar, telling my mate Chris about how I’m sick of her telling me she wants a ring – you remember Chris? Big guy with a lisp. You met him at Rozwyn’s christening.

‘Anyway, there’s this pissed older guy at the bar on his own, bit of a ponce in his corduroy jacket, wavy hair, and he’s pissing me off, to be honest, because I can tell he’s listening, and I ask him what the fuck he’s looking at and he looks me straight in the eye,’ said Polworth, ‘and he says: “You can only carry a weight and use your hands, if you strap the weight to your back. Marry, and you get the use of your hands back. Don’t marry, and you’ll never have your hands free for anything else. Look at Mazankov, at Krupov. They’ve ruined their careers for the sake of women.”

‘I thought Mazankov and Krupov were mates of his. Asked him

Troubled Blood

what the fuck he was telling me for. Then he says he's quoting this writer, Tolstoy.

'And we got talking and I tell you this, Diddy, it was a life-changing moment. The light bulb went on,' said Polworth, pointing at the air over his balding head. 'He made me see it clearly. The male predicament, mate. There I am, trying to get my hole on a Thursday night, heading home alone again, poorer, bored shitless; I thought of the money I've spent chasing gash, and the hassle, and whether I want to be watching porn alone at forty, and I thought, this is the whole point. What marriage is for. Am I going to do better than Penny? Am I enjoying talking shit to women in bars? Penny and me get on all right. I could do a hell of a lot worse. She's not bad-looking. I'd have my hole already at home, waiting for me, wouldn't I?'

'Pity she can't hear this,' said Strike. 'She'd fall in love with you all over again.'

'I shook that poncey bloke's hand,' said Polworth, ignoring Strike's sarcasm. 'Made him write me down the name of the book and all. Went straight out that bar, got a taxi to Penny's flat, banged on the door, woke her up. She was fucking livid. Thought I'd come round because I was pissed, couldn't get anything better and wanted a shag. I said, "No, you dozy cow, I'm here because I wanna marry you."'

'And I'll tell you the name of the book,' said Polworth. '*Anna Karenina*.' He drained his pint. 'It's shit.'

Strike laughed.

Polworth belched loudly, then checked his watch. He was a man who knew a good exit line and had no more time for prolonged leave-taking than for Russian literature.

'Gonna get going, Diddy,' he said, getting to his feet. 'If I'm back before half eleven, I'm on for a birthday blowie – which is the whole point I'm making, mate. Whole point.'

Grinning, Strike accepted Polworth's handshake. Polworth told Strike to convey his love to Joan and to call him next time he was down, then squeezed his way out of the pub, and disappeared from view.