



Vertigo 42

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Vertigo 42

Martha GRIMES

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480 pages

Extrait

Vertigo 42

Vertigo 42, the City

Monday, 6:00 P.M.

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It was far too high to see Old Broad Street down below, but the windows that traveled all the way around the lozenge-shaped room gave as great a view of London as he'd ever seen. The Thames, Westminster, St. Paul's, Southwark, everything miniaturized. He was so high up he fancied he'd almost had an attack of vertigo on the fast elevator that made only one stop, and that one at the top of Tower 42: Vertigo.

Jury was looking down at the Thames, moving off in one direction toward Gravesend and Gallions Reach, which he couldn't of course see; in the other direction, the Isle of Dogs, Richmond, and Hampton Court. He tried to picture all of those ships that had once steamed toward London's docks, toward Rotherhithe and the Blackwall Basin in the not-so-distant past, and in just such light as Jury was seeing now, the sun setting on St Paul's. In the deep sunset hovering over buildings, the outlines blurred. They might have been dark hills.

He was looking toward Docklands, an area that used to comprise the West India Docks and beyond to the Blackwell Basin, one thing that remained after the docks closed. Eighty-some acres of what was now the Canary Wharf estate. Hundreds of dockers had once lived and worked there; now it was office workers, glass buildings, and converted warehouses.

Vertigo 42, this bar at the top of one of the financial towers in the "square mile" that made up the City of London—London's financial district—might have been designed to create the illusion of a city down there. Or perhaps that thought was merely brought on by the champagne Jury was drinking. Champagne was something he never drank and wasn't used to; but that's what you got up here, that's why people came here—to drink champagne.

The champagne had been brought by a waiter "at the request of Mr. Williamson, sir." The waiter set down two glasses and poured into one of them. Jury drank. He had forgotten champagne; he had certainly forgotten great champagne, if he'd ever known it at all. This lot (he had checked the wine list) was costing Mr. Williamson in the vicinity of 385 quid. One bottle. That much. It was Krug. Was wine this expensive meant to be swallowed? Or just held in the mouth as the eye held on to the barges streaked with orange light there on the river.

The waiter returned with a dish of incandescent green olives, big ones; he placed them on the counter that ran beneath the window and between the rather trendy-looking but very comfortable chairs.

Jury was there to meet not an old friend, but a friend of an old friend, Sir Oswald Maples. The friend of the friend was Williamson, who had ordered the champagne. Oswald Maples had asked Jury if he could spare some time to talk to Tom Williamson, and Jury said, "Of course. Why?" To which Oswald had said, "You'll see." Jury filled his glass again before he moved to another window and another view of the Thames.

“My favorite view,” said a voice behind him. Jury turned.

“Superintendent Jury? I’m Tom Williamson. I’m very sorry I’m late.”

“I’m not,” said Jury, lifting the Krug from its ice bed. “You will notice this is considerably below the waterline.”

Tom Williamson laughed and poured a measure into his own glass. He was a tall man, taller by an inch than Jury himself. “Fortunately, there’s a lot more sea.” He raised his glass, tipped it toward Jury’s. “You like ships, Superintendent?”

“I don’t know anything about them, except there’s a waterline on the hull.”

Tom smiled. “I love them. My grandfather was in the shipping business. Down there used to be steamships of the East India Company loaded with stuff—tea, spices, as many as a thousand ships going toward the docks. And barges. Now we’ve got tourist cruisers and speedboats. Still a lot of river traffic, just not the same traffic. Thanks for meeting me.”

The thanks came without a pause between it and the river traffic. The way he talked, the directness, as if he didn’t want to waste any time, made Jury smile. Williamson had yet to remove his coat, which he now did, and tossed it over one of the coolly blue amoeba-shaped chairs.

“An interesting bar to choose,” said Jury. “Light-years above the ones I frequent down there.” He nodded toward the window and approaching dark. “Do you work in the City?”

“No. I know nothing about finance. You wonder why I chose it?”

Jury laughed. “I’m not complaining, believe me. It must have the best views of anyplace in London.”

“Yes. I don’t come here often.” He sat back. “Perhaps I chose it because up here is quite literally above it all.” He sipped some champagne.

Jury smiled. “What’s the ‘all’?”

Williamson looked perplexed.

“That you want to be above?”

Williamson picked up an olive but didn’t eat it. He put it on one of the small paper napkins the waiter had supplied. “You know a man with the Devon-Cornwall police. A Commander Macalvie?”

Jury was so surprised by this sudden segue he spilled his champagne, fortunately only on himself. “Sorry.” He brushed at the spill with a napkin. “Brian Macalvie? I certainly do. But it was Sir Oswald Maples who spoke to me about you—”

“Of course. I’m sorry. I’m tossing too many balls in the air.” He plucked the bottle from its stand and poured more for each of them. “I don’t know how much Oswald told you . . .”

“Nothing, other than that you worked for the Government Code and Cipher School, GC and CS. Not when

he was there, but after it changed to GC Headquarters and got moved to Cheltenham.”

Tom Williamson nodded.

Jury went on: “Sir Oswald knows I’m a sucker for that stuff. I stopped at Bletchley Park to see the Enigma machine. It was incredible work they did, Alan Turing and the others.”

Williamson said, “Oswald was at Bletchley Park during the war. He was really into it, very high up. I wasn’t so much; my work was small potatoes by comparison. Your name came up—that is, he thought of you when I was visiting him one evening in Chelsea. It’s about my wife, Tess.”

“Your wife?” Jury looked over his shoulder, quite stupidly, as if he expected to find Tess there, behind their chairs.

“She’s dead.”

Somehow, Jury had known that, even as he turned to look for her.

“Seventeen years ago.” He paused long enough to have counted every one. “We had—I still have—a house in Devon, very large, too large for us, certainly. Woods, extensive gardens, tiered and rather Italianate, I suppose, and too much to maintain, even with the gardener, who’s been there for years. But Tess wasn’t really interested in bringing it back, as they say, to its former glory. She liked the unruliness of it, the wildness. She was a bit of a romantic, Tess.”

It had grown dark now and the lights had come on along the Embankment and across the river in Southwark. “I met Tess in Norfolk, along the coast. We liked to watch the lights in the harbor. That’s the other reason I like this bar. Down there. The lights coming on.” He stopped.

Jury waited.

Tom cleared his throat and went on. “I was talking about our house in Devon. As for me, I saw a lot of unkempt lawn, tangled vines, rioting weeds, and tree rot.” The laugh was perfunctory, not happy. “At the rear of the house in the gardens there were—are—two concrete pools, ornamental once, I expect. Empty now. There’s a wide patio and a flight of wide stone steps. Urns placed strategically round the patio and at the top and bottom of the stairs.” He looked away from the dark Thames below, curving in the distance. “Excuse all of the detail, but this is where she died, you see. At the bottom of these stairs. Tess was given to attacks of vertigo.”

Jury felt disturbed by this accounting because he knew behind it lay another accounting.

“She apparently—”

Jury could see the man’s mouth working to get beyond “apparently” and said it for him. “Fell.”

Williamson nodded. “Her head hit a stone plinth at the bottom. Pedestal of an urn. Grecian.”

As if Keats might help out here.

Then to keep going, Tom took a pack of Silk Cuts from his pocket, stuck one in his mouth before he

remembered to offer the pack to Jury, who, after gazing at the cigarette for half his life, declined. Tom lit one with a cheap, no-nonsense lighter, which he placed on the table beside the cigarettes. The man was obviously wealthy but didn't express it in silver cigarette cases and lighters.

Out of another pocket he took a folded paper. It was worn with creases from countless refoldings. "This is a poem she liked by Eliot; the book was given her by a photographer friend. It sounds almost like directions for a pose, doesn't it?" Tom smiled a little and read:

"Stand on the highest pavement of the stair—

Lean on a garden urn—

Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair . . ."

Setting aside the poem for the moment, he reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and took out a small picture, hardly more than a snapshot, but paper of studio quality. A portrait in little. "This is Tess."

Jury took it. "The pose is like the poem, yes."

"It is. I've the original photograph at home. Tess was pretty."

"That's an understatement, Mr. Williamson." Jury felt, for some reason, oddly forlorn.

" 'Tom,' please."

"Where is home? Devon?"

"Devon? Oh, no. Not that house. I live in Knightsbridge. That's our London house."

Jury went back to the problem, or what he took it to be: "There would have been a police inquiry. What was the result?"

Williamson shrugged, as if the result were irrelevant. "Open verdict. There wasn't enough evidence to determine one way or another."

"You didn't agree."

Enter, Brian Macalvie. He would probably have been a detective inspector seventeen years back. "Was Commander Macalvie—he wouldn't have been commander then—was he the primary on this?"

Tom shook his head. "The man in charge was a Chief Inspector Bishop, no, Bishoff. He was convinced it was accidental. There was, of course, reason to believe it was an accident because of the vertigo. The steps there are high."

"But they were her steps."

"Precisely. She was all too familiar with them. Chief Inspector Bishoff made the point that it was probably a misstep, or something fallen on one of the steps, in her path. But it wasn't. No, I'm sure someone arranged to have it look like an accident."

“But why did you think that? Purely on the basis that it wasn’t vertigo that caused it?”

“No.” His fingers were on the stem of his champagne flute. He turned and turned the glass. “No. It was the way Tess was lying.” He looked toward the window.

Jury was sure he wasn’t seeing London beyond it.

“She was lying with her arms outflung, the flowers she’d been carrying scattered.”

“Do you think it was some sort of enactment of the figure in the poem?”

Tom read more lines from the poem still lying on the table:

“Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise—

Fling them to the ground and turn

With a fugitive resentment in your eyes.”

“It did look a little like it. Arranged.”

“What about this photographer, then?”

“Andrew Cleary. She called him Angel Clare, after the character in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*; she was very fond of Thomas Hardy. He had nothing to do with her death; he was in Paris.”

Jury was silent for a moment. Then he said, “Was there someone you think had a reason to kill your wife?”

He did not answer but rose and took a couple of steps toward the window.

Jury had the strange feeling Tom was in some way reentering his wife’s death, standing there as if there were a stone stairway down to Old Broad Street. Then he turned back, sat down. “There was an incident, something pretty dreadful that involved Tess five years before she died. I said ‘incident.’ Ridiculous. It was more than that; it was another accident at the same house, the same rear gardens . . .” He rubbed the heel of his palm against the side of his head, as if trying to call something up.

“Tess had a party for some children at Laburnum. That’s the name of our Devon house. Six of them, the children. Tess was very fond of children and we had none, unfortunately. She would get up parties for kids, their birthdays, or holidays, even arcane Welsh or Scottish holidays most of us have never heard of . . .” He moved his shoulders a little, as if resettling a coat around his neck. As if he were cold.

“Anyway”—he continued with the story—“at one of these parties at Laburnum, a child named Hilda Palmer fell into one of the drained pools. They were concrete pools, fairly deep. They should have been filled or fenced and Tess was in the process of organizing that; she was lining up an Exeter firm; unfortunately it hadn’t been done yet. Of course, the kids had been told not to play at the rear of the house in the gardens around those pools. But Hilda went round, apparently, when they were playing, got near the pool, missed her footing, and fell in.

“Tess was in the house, getting the cake and other party food ready. It was somebody’s birthday. She heard a

shout, some noise. The kids were supposed to keep to the front of the house—this is a large house, as I told you, with extensive gardens and woods.

“What she told us was that she went out to investigate, but didn’t see anything. She went down the steps and looked around, saw nothing, heard nothing, and then she got closer to the drained pools. There was Hilda lying crumpled at the bottom. She wasn’t moving. Tess said she thought she was unconscious and jumped down into the pool. But Hilda wasn’t breathing. She was dead. Just like that.”

“How terrible.”

Tom closed his eyes briefly, shaking his head. “The children told her they were playing hide-and-seek. So they didn’t see which way the others had gone. Behind a tree, into the maze, into the shrubbery . . . They were all in different places.” Nervously, Tom picked up his packet of cigarettes and lit one.

This had happened over twenty years before, yet it still made the man’s hands shake. “That this Hilda Palmer missed her footing and fell in, this was the inference drawn by police?”

Tom shook his head. “This was the inference Tess drew. No one saw anything. When she discovered the girl was dead she yelled for help. Elaine Davies, a friend of Tess, and the kids all came running. Tess called the police; the ambulance came; detectives and all of their people came.

“So to answer your question: the inference drawn by police was that Hilda Palmer was killed by someone; that she was struck, and that’s what caused her fall. There was a good deal of blood. Tess had it on her hands, her dress. The coroner argued that there appeared to be no reason for the fall; that is, unless the child was given to bouts of dizziness. Police said there was nothing around the pools that anyone could trip over—”

Jury snorted. “She could have tripped over her own feet, tripped over air.”

“I know. But that was the argument.”

“Why would someone have tried to kill her?”

Tom shook his head. “Hilda was only a child, nine years old, but she was an unpopular child. She was a bit of a bully. But worse, she had even gotten some adult backs up because she seemed to be able to ferret out information, God knows how, and would hold it over people’s heads.”

“Blackmail, then.”

Tom shrugged. “Something like that.” He pulled their champagne bottle out of the cooler, saw it was empty, shoved it back in. “I wouldn’t mind a whiskey, myself. You? Or more champagne?”

“A whiskey would be fine.”

“Brand?”

“You choose.”

Tom motioned a waiter over and ordered Laphroaig 18.

Not what Jury would have chosen, only because he couldn't afford it.

Once the waiter left, Tom went on. "At the inquest there was a great deal of disagreement as to what had happened. Not everyone believed Hilda was struck and shoved into the pool. Some thought it, as Tess had reported it, an accident and that the blow to the head had come when she hit the bottom. There are big pieces of broken cement down there, chunks of it, and rocks as well."

"Those would have been quite different events, though."

"Not according to police forensics. The forensic testimony was rather amazing. Both of them had very good evidence for reaching these conclusions. Finally, it was an open verdict. The evidence wasn't conclusive.

"It was Tess who was under siege," he said, turning to Jury. "It was Tess who would have been indicted—and she was, by the mother and others. People held Tess responsible. It was her property the children were on; they were in her care; Tess should never have allowed them to be around those unfenced pools. God knows Hilda's mother blamed her. She was in a rage; she had to be physically restrained. Grief, of course, explained much of it. But the hatred of Tess never stopped."

The waiter appeared and set down the two drinks, offered snacks, which they both declined.

Jury took a drink of the pricy whiskey. "Do you think there's a good possibility that the mother murdered your wife?"

"It was five years later, I know. A bit long for revenge."

"Hamlet managed. Had this woman tried to contact Tess during those five years?"

"Oh, yes. A number of times."

"Then did the Devon police see this Palmer woman as a viable suspect?"

Tom shook his head. "The chief inspector was convinced Tess's was an accidental death. Vertigo. Tess was always taking tumbles, catching her high heel on a curb or uneven pavement, miscalculating a step down—that sort of thing. The way she fell down those steps, the way her head hit the base of the urn—all of it appeared evidence of an accident."

They were silent for a moment. Then Jury said, "Was there something you wanted me to do, Tom?"

"Yes. When I was talking to Oswald, he said he had a good friend who was a superintendent at New Scotland Yard. That got me thinking . . . Well, I'll certainly understand if you don't—" Tom Williamson rubbed again at his wrist at the place where the watch wasn't.

Jury wondered what had happened to it. "If I don't—?"

"Want to have a word with Commander Macalvie?"

"You mean try to reopen the case? That would be somewhat—unorthodox, wouldn't it? Someone in my position interfering with someone in his position?" To say nothing of being highly improper, against every tenet of police procedure, against propriety, and, probably, against the queen. Jury could hardly wait to ring

him.

“Right. Sorry. I know it’s a harebrained idea.” Tom Williamson tossed back the rest of his whiskey.

“Not at all. I can understand how hard it must be, not knowing.” How many other platitudes had Jury got waiting in the wings? “But, yes, I don’t mind putting a question to Mr. Macalvie. He’s a friend of mine.”

Tom looked as if he’d just been given the City below them. “That would be extremely kind.”

“But, listen: if by some miracle police did reinvestigate your wife’s death and found it was murder, what then? What would you do? What could you do?”

Tom thought for a moment. “Well, I expect I’d better get a solicitor.”

Jury looked puzzled.

Tom smiled wryly. “Because I’d be the prime suspect. My wife was a very wealthy woman.” He pulled the empty bottle of Krug out of the bed of ice. “This kind of wealthy.”

Smiling slightly, Jury said, “If you’re to be the prime suspect, I take it you have an alibi?”

“I was in London. As a matter of fact I was visiting Oswald.”

“That should do it.” Jury set down his glass.

Tom said, suddenly, “Where are you going after this, Superintendent?”

“Going? Nowhere. Back to my digs. I live in Islington.”

Tom had his mobile out and said, “Would you pardon me for a moment while I make this call?”

“Of course.” Jury was happy to be alone here at the top of Tower 42, looking out on a London that at this point was inaccessible to him and he to it. He rose to move closer to the window. Tess Williamson would not have been able to look down on London without being terrified, he supposed.

Tom Williamson was back, sitting down, picking up his drink. Jury joined him.

“I canceled a dinner engagement. I wonder if you’d like to have dinner with me? I was thinking of the Zetter in Clerkenwell. It’s close to Islington, so you wouldn’t be too inconvenienced getting home. Do you know it?”

The Zetter was where he had met Lu Aguilar; she had then been a detective inspector with Islington police. And she was now, after a terrible car wreck and its aftermath of weeks in a coma, back home in Brazil. She had regained consciousness, but the consciousness wasn’t telling her much. Jury was a stranger.

“Oh, yes. I know it.” *Revue de presse*

The character sketches Grimes provides are more satisfying than other authors’ full portraits. Longtime fans will find this tale fully worthy of Jury and his regulars. (*Kirkus*)

Grimes, recipient of the Grand Master Award of the Mystery Writers of America in 2012, shows what mastery is all about in this compelling new Richard Jury mystery...[many] murders occupy Jury as he confronts the puzzle of the past, and Grimes ingeniously links all of them to Hitchcock. One of the highlights in a stellar series. (*Booklist starred review*)

Four years is much too long to go without a wonderfully loopy Martha Grimes mystery featuring her Scotland Yard detective, Superintendent Richard Jury, and his eccentric friends—and their dogs. A forlorn Staffordshire terrier named Stanley makes an appearance in *Vertigo 42*, as do a winsome stray named Joey and some unnamed pit bulls victimized in a cruel dogfighting racket operating under the radar in London. Hurting an animal is like betraying a friend to Grimes, who draws on literature to develop her themes of friendship and loyalty and extend them to Jury's murder case. (Marilyn Stasio *The New York Times*)

"Grimes, who excels in atmosphere as well as plot, again concocts an absorbing tale. With a nod to — and a clever twist on — Alfred Hitchcock's classic *Vertigo*, she treats readers to an intelligent, literary whodunit marked by her wit, her wisdom and, most of all, her sympathetic understanding of humanity." (*Richmond-Times Dispatch*)

It's been four years since I had a chance to delight in the company of Superintendent Richard Jury of Scotland Yard and I'm so glad he's back. He and his colleagues are grand companions. Once again, Martha Grimes has written a whodunit with terrific characters and a grand plot mixed with her unique droll wit. *Vertigo 42* is one smart mystery! (Susan Isaacs, bestselling author of *The Goldberg Variations*)

Like all great satirists, Ms. Grimes sees the world from the other side of the looking glass and invites us to come along for a wild and wacky ride. (Nelson DeMille, bestselling author of *The Panther*)

Gloriously quirky...Grimes is no slouch at creating vivid characters. (The Seattle Times) Présentation de l'éditeur

C'est par un ami que Richard Jury, le célèbre commissaire de New Scotland Yard, rencontre Tom Williamson. Ce dernier le supplie de rouvrir une vieille affaire : seize ans auparavant, sa femme Tess a été retrouvée morte au pied de l'escalier de leur propriété du Devon.

À l'époque, la police ne s'était pas prononcée sur les causes du décès, accidentel a priori. Mais Tom, lui, a toujours cru à une mise en scène. Sans compter la chute mortelle d'une fillette, survenue six ans avant la mort de Tess, dans un des bassins vides de ce même jardin. Et d'étranges similitudes que constate également le commissaire.

Et, à peine Jury commence-t-il à fouiner sur place, que deux nouvelles morts suspectes viennent assombrir cet étrange tableau, composé de chutes et de vertiges.

" Martha Grimes signe un brillant roman mâtiné de suspense et d'humour. "

La Gazette Nord-Pas de Calais

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