

FROM

The Darwin Affair

BY TIM MASON



The heat moved like a feral thing through the streets, fetid and inescapable. Chief Detective Inspector Charles Field, sweating in his shiny black greatcoat, ducked into the shadowed portico of a house near St. Albans Street, just bordering the Mall. Because of the view it offered, as well as the protection from the elements, it was the spot he invariably used to monitor royal processions along this stretch. The horses pulling the royal carriage plodded solemnly, resignedly, their tails flicking at the flies. Victoria and Albert, their faces glimpsed within the open coach, had a wilted look, but they seemed to be conversing nevertheless. Today, given the heat and the mundane nature of Her Majesty's errand (she and the Prince Consort were to open a public bath in the West End), the crowd was understandably thin. But because the Queen already had survived several attempts on her life, the royal coach was accompanied by a couple of the Horse Guard. A few police constables, Field's men, walked here and there along the route, watching the spectators and licking perspiration from beneath their mustaches.

Inspector Field, his face glistening, clutched his stiff top hat behind his back. Tall, dark, and burly, he was clean-shaven, unlike most of his contemporaries, and gave the impression of not having been properly introduced to the clothing he wore. His shifting gaze touched each onlooker, one by one, and then came to rest on a skinny, threadbare figure on the curb directly before him.

I know you.

Little Stevie Patchen was an eighteen-year-old pickpocket and occasional purveyor of stolen goods. Field and his men had hauled him before

the magistrates more than once. “Hatchet-Face,” as Stevie was known to his intimates, was a very small fish in London’s large pond of criminality, but what was he doing here among these mostly provincial sightseers? And what was he holding in a bundle of rags wrapped round his right hand?

As the royal carriage drew abreast of him, Stevie’s arm rose. “Oi!” shouted Field, starting to move. “Stevie!”

The youth glanced nervously over his shoulder, saw the policeman bearing down on him, and flung away the bundle of rags. He hadn’t run more than a couple of yards before Field tackled him, tumbling him and then immediately hauling him to his feet again, and frog-marching him back toward St. Albans Street. The royal carriage continued slowly on.

“Leave off!” cried Stevie. Field spun the lad around and shoved him against the railings of a grand house at No. 44 St. Albans, introducing the back of his head to the iron rods. A fine spray spurted from Stevie’s nose. “Now look, I’m bleedin’!”

“It was a gun you just pitched away, was it not? Assassination? You’re out of your depth, Stevie!”

“This all you got to do now you’re famous, Mr. Bucket? Persecute the lowly?”

“My name is Field, not Bucket. He’s a fiction, and I am a real, daylight fact, right here before you. Whatever do you have against the Queen?”

“I don’t know what you’re on about.” Stevie wiped his bloody nose with a sleeve.

“I’ll tell you what *you’re* about, young man, you’re about the hangman’s rope that is someday a-waiting you, that’s all. You know it, and I know it, and I’d wager your mother knew it, too, to her sorrow, as you partook the maternal refreshment.”

“Sod off.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Field, danger in his voice.

Stevie’s eyes darted furtively. “Think you’re so bleedin’ smart.”

A fearful thought occurred to the inspector: *I’m looking at a decoy.*

“Damn,” he muttered, shoving the little man from him and then abruptly running, pelting along the broad Mall, scattering pigeons as he ran. The sudden crack of a pistol shot smote him like a blow.

Oh, dear God.

Field sprinted down the dusty road, trying to make out what was happening.

Another shot.

He saw a confusion of blue and red and black surrounding the carriage and heard the cries of men and frightened horses. A couple of onlookers had got someone on the ground, thrashing and cursing. The horses of the Guard were rearing, and the coachman was trying to calm the steeds harnessed to the royal carriage. As Field came abreast of the entourage, he saw the Queen, flushed and wide-eyed, talking rapidly to her husband, gesturing and scanning the horror-struck crowd. And then Prince Albert's furious gaze came to rest directly on him, Inspector Field of the Detective.

Her Majesty's alive, anyway, although my own prospects are dim.

The figure on the ground was no longer struggling; a policeman sat on the man's chest while others pinioned his arms and legs.

"Kilvert!" cried Field, and one of the constables, a rail-thin, dour Welshman, appeared at his side. "You and Llewellyn see to it no other blighter in the crowd's got a bloody gun—I've got Hatchet-Face back at St. Albans with a gun or something like it."

"Yes, sir!"

There was a cry and the crack of a whip, and the black-and-gold carriage lurched into motion once again, making a wide arc and turning back toward the palace, its royal passengers seemingly safe after yet another assassination attempt. Field was running in roughly the same direction, back toward St. Albans, determined to find Little Stevie and wrest from him a name, a face, a description.

Stevie, however, as Charles Field, deep in his dark policeman's heart already feared, was no longer available for questioning. What Field hadn't anticipated, however, was to find him just round the corner from where he'd left him. The young man sat beneath the wrought-iron railings behind No. 44, his back against the rods and his head resting on his left shoulder. His narrow face was tilted sideways to the pitiless sky, his waistcoat scarlet and glistening, his throat sliced to the bone.

Inspector Field quickly looked up and down St. Albans Street and then knelt in the widening pool of Stevie's blood. The young man's right hand was thrust into the pocket of his trousers. Field gently pulled Stevie's arm, and

the hand emerged, fist still clenched. When he prized it open, a bloodied sovereign dropped from the fingers. Field got to his feet, picking up the coin and grimacing at the sticky feel of wet at his knees and hands.

“You there!”

Two young constables Field didn’t recognize ran toward him. One thrust the inspector against the railings and pinned him there with his truncheon.

“Whoa, now!” shouted Field. “Get your hands off!”

A liveried servant, wigless and unbuttoned, approached, carrying a toast-fork, looking both fierce and frightened. “That’s ’im!” he cried. “E did it, I saw it all!”

“Constable,” said Field, “you must be new to the Metropolitan. *I am chief of detectives, do you understand me?*”

The other policeman, crouching beside Stevie, looked up and said, “He’s dead all right.”

“Murderer!” cried a woman from the corner. She and several others were approaching.

“I saw it all!” repeated the servant from No. 44, shrilly.

“You will release me this instant!” shouted Field. “I’ve work to do!”

“I believe you already done your work here, sir. You’re half-covered in blood, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“I was inspecting the body, idiot!” Field glanced down, following the constable’s pointed gaze, and saw that not only were his knees and hands wet with gore, but his shirt front and waistcoat were speckled with a fine red spray.

“He had nosebleed, for God’s sake!”

The other constable rose to his feet, and as he did so, Stevie’s head fell like a lid to the right, exposing vertebrae, oozing clusters of tubes, and a gaping hole where the left ear should have been.

“Good God,” murmured Field.

“Nosebleed, right, then.” In less than a moment Inspector Field was roughly handcuffed to the iron fence, with the body at his feet.

Meanwhile the alarm surrounding the assassination attempt had risen, with bells sounding in the distance, horses’ hooves pounding up and down the Mall, and police whistles blowing. The crowd in St. Albans, watching Field’s arrest and morbidly eyeing the nearly headless figure of young

Hatchet-Face, had grown. Police Constable Kilvert pushed his way through the throng.

“Josiah!” cried the inspector. “Get me clear of these fools!”

“Officers,” said Kilvert, “you’ve made a grave mistake here. Just up from the provinces, aren’t you, and soon to return at this rate.”

The constables looked abashed, but the man in footman’s livery was sputtering. “It weren’t no mistake! I was watchin’ from the winder all mornin’, an’ there wasn’t nobody but ’im in the road—’im and the bloke ’e done for!”

“That’s enough out of you, Brass Buttons, this man here is Detective Field!” Kilvert grew indignant. “Mr. Charles Dickens called him Bucket!”

“Shut up, Kilvert!” said Field.

“Inspector Bucket of the Detective!”

“Kilvert, you ass,” said Field, “just get me out of this!”

As the inspector was released, there was renewed scrutiny from the crowd. It was clear that many of them had heard of Dickens’s fictional detective. For a person who did not in fact exist, Mr. Bucket was quite the celebrity, and so was his model.

“I don’t care who he is,” cried the woman from the corner, “he’s been a-murderin’ the populace!”

“You there!” said Field, thrusting a large forefinger at the liveried servant. “You’re going to tell me what you saw from the window, lad—that’s what you’re going to do.”

The young man with the brass buttons, somewhat abashed by the turn of events, muttered, “You know wot I saw.”

“I do *not*, in point of fact. I know what *I* saw, but I’ve a keen interest in *your* observations. Go on. You were watching, you say. You saw no one but me and the, uh—this fellow?”

“That’s right. Just you and ’im, and you weren’t poundin’ ’im, oh no, *you* weren’t!”

The onlookers murmured ominously.

Field put a fatherly arm round the servant’s narrow shoulders, causing the young man to shudder.

“What’s your name, son?”

Looking as though he wasn’t eager to expand the acquaintance, he replied, “Willis.”

“Right, then, Willis. You saw no one but me and . . .” He tilted his head in the direction of the corpse. “No passersby? No tradesmen? Not so much as a nurse pushin’ a pram?”

“Not to mention, no. I mean, there was an old lady just now.”

“How old was she, Willis?”

Willis glanced over his shoulder at the crowd and felt their support. “A hundred and twenty-six, sir.”

The laughter was universal and no one seemed more pleased than Inspector Field.

“Delightful lad,” he said, beaming. “So we got one crone, we got me and the dead bloke, and that’s all, that’s it, there ain’t no more, we can all go home now, is that right, young Willis?”

Willis was beginning to enjoy the show. “That’s about it, sir. Oh, there was a dog, I was forgettin’ the dog.”

Gusts of laughter from the crowd.

“The dog could be important, Willis, you never know,” said Field, still smiling and nodding. “What was the dog doing?”

Groans now from the crowd, whose impression of the police as a bunch of sorry buffoons was being confirmed.

“Doin’?” said Willis. “Dog was doin’ ’is bizness, wasn’t ’e?” Laughter, tinged with scorn. “Doin’ ’is bizness an’ sniffin’ up the butcher’s man, just like always.”

“Which butcher’s man was this, now, Willis?”

“Comes every second day, don’t ’e? Brings a joint to No. 42.” Field flicked the merest glance at Kilvert, who nodded and moved quietly through the crowd toward No. 42 St. Albans.

“I see,” said Field. “Comes every other day, wheeling a barrow with a joint or a haunch, and the dogs all love him ’cause his apron’s covered in blood, is that about right, Willis, my boy?”

“That’s about it, sir!” cried Willis triumphantly, looking around and grinning as though he were about to take a bow. The crowd, however—or at least a number of them—had assumed more thoughtful expressions and did not look as likely to applaud as they had a moment ago.

Police Constable Sam Llewellyn, a black-haired, pink-cheeked lad from Abergavenny, arrived breathlessly. “Sir, you’re wanted.” Llewellyn’s gaze fell

on the body of Stevie Patchen. “Good Lord. Where in God’s name is the blighter’s left ear?”

“Well, *I* haven’t got it, Mr. Llewellyn. Get the crowd back and have a look round. Also, Stevie threw a bundle into the bushes back there—find it.”

“Yes, sir. I was sent to fetch you, sir. You’re wanted at the palace.” His voice dropped to an undertone. “It seems the royal family is not best pleased.”

THE DARWIN AFFAIR

by Tim Mason

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