Death in the First Edition

Story by Henry Slesar

A Jigsaw Puzzle Mystery
MENU
for
Dr. David Black’s
"Great Expectations" Dinner

Dry Martinis
Oliver Twist

Salad
Bleak House Dressing

Dover Sole/Dublin Bay Prawns
Tail of Two Cities

The Old Curiosity Chop

Barnaby Fudge

Coffee, Tea, Liqueurs
"To Charles John Huffam Dickens!"

There was an odd response to his toast as Dr. David Black lifted his wine glass above the heads of his six seated guests. None of them smiled or showed the slightest answering sentiment. In fact, a flash photograph of the scene would have revealed a frown, a scowl, a glare, and in the case of at least three of the diners, a grimace of pure hatred.

The truth is, not one of his guests wanted to be present at what Dr. Black, with his Dickensian obsessions, called his "Great Expectations" dinner party. Not only did they despise Dr. Black, they loathed exposing themselves to each other's company.

Both reactions were easy to understand. All six of Dr. Black's guests were his "patients." Very special patients, all suffering from the same disease.

Blackmail.

They had all growled with displeasure when they received the dinner invitation, but they knew Dr. Black too well to be surprised. It wasn't the first time they had been forced into his company. Black, with typical self-delusion, preferred to believe he was offering therapy to his victims. The payments he extorted from them were presented as "medical services." But there was no hope of recovering the staggering sums from the National Health Service, since "Doctor" Black's title was no longer legitimate.
Black didn’t mind giving up his medical practice. He was far too interested in his hobby—or rather, his passion. Dr. Black collected rare books. He loved First Editions. He crooned over ancient leatherbound works. He went into raptures at rare book auctions and exhibitions. But he also discovered the sad fact that most rare book prices were well beyond the income of a simple village physician.

Fortunately for him, Dr. Black discovered an effective way to meet those costs. He had several wealthy patients with country homes in the vicinity of his small office. With innocent questions about their history, he slowly gathered a list of secrets that were worth a small fortune.

When one of his early victims threatened to expose him to the authorities, Black took care of that difficulty. He resigned his practice, and retired to indulge his hobby: collecting books—and blackmail fees.

Those fees mounted steadily over the years. Dr. Black accumulated so many fine books—including a dozen sets of first edition Dickens—that he was soon crowded out of his modest cottage. He knew he would have to move, to find a new home for his precious volumes. And then the perfect opportunity came his way. Tudor Close was for sale!

It was one of England’s finest estates, with high-vaulted rooms, luxurious furnishings and splendid grounds. But Tudor Close had something Dr. Black valued even more. It had a magnificent library.

As the dinner grew to a close, Dr. Black grew more and more exhilarated at the prospect of showing off his new acquisition.
It was true the library wasn’t quite finished; there was still some
cataloguing to be done, some shelves to be adjusted, some titles to
be arranged, and Dr. Black was painfully meticulous about having
everything in perfect alphabetical order. He was proud of the room’s
thick carpeting, its wood paneling, the chess table with its exquisite
alabaster pieces. And most of all, he was proud of his books.

Then the waiting was over. The last liqueur was downed, the
last mint digested, the last toast toasted. Dr. Black rose and ushered
his guests to the doors that led to the most important room in
Tudor Close. With a dramatic flourish, he threw open the doors,
and let his guests feast their eyes.

**Professor Peter Plum** wasn’t impressed by what he saw in Dr.
Black’s library. A transplanted American, he considered himself
more a man of action than of intellect. His favorite room was his
home gymnasium. He had read enough books in his academic career
and he hadn’t the slightest interest in indoor games. There was
only one object in the room that interested him. It was a Roman
spear displayed on the far wall. He would have liked nothing better
than to yank it from its moorings and bury its blade into Dr. Black’s
throat, especially after their private conversation before dinner.

"It looks like I’ll have to increase your ‘medical’ fee," Dr.
Black had told him cheerfully. "Tudor Close is wonderful, but the
upkeep is horrendous. I’m sure you understand."

Professor Plum understood only too well. He had “under-
stood” Dr. Black from the day the physician came to his house to
treat the Professor's wife for "food poisoning." After none-too-
subtle hints about a monthly "health insurance" payment, the Doctor prepared a death certificate that blamed Mrs. Plum's untimely end on salmonella in the chicken—not on the cyanide in her trifle....

Mrs. Elizabeth Peacock had concocted that fatal dessert, as Dr. Black easily determined. She didn't usually choose such unpalatable ingredients. The widowed Mrs. Peacock considered herself a gourmet. She loved to eat well, but she had to admit that there was little pleasure in dining alone. When Professor Plum moved into the neighborhood, she found herself succumbing to his blunt charm.

To this day, Mrs. Peacock wasn't sure which one of them proposed the "quick solution" that would free them to marry. But after the deed was done, the Professor and Mrs. Peacock discovered that they had nothing at all in common—except Dr. David Black.

"I'm sure that you won't miss twenty-five pounds a month," Dr. Black had told her with a toothy grin.

Eventually, the twenty-five pounds became fifty, and then seventy-five, and when she received the invitation to the "Great Expectations" dinner she felt certain that Dr. Black had new expectations of his own.

"It's the taxes, you see," Dr. Black explained as they strolled the grounds. "They're infernally high for a place the size. So shall..."
was a servant, after all, and there was still protocol to be observed, even in this liberalized society.

In truth, Mrs. White would have been much happier to keep her distance from Tudor Close, Dr. Black, and the memory of that terrible night—the night when Professor Plum's wife died, and the physician presented her with what he called the "laboratory proof" of the fatal error she had made. Mrs. White swore she had prepared the trifle exactly as Mrs. Peacock had ordered, but the Doctor had merely looked at her with doleful eyes.

"You made an error, Mrs. White," he said gravely. "You added a fatal ingredient without realizing it, and now a woman is dead. But," he sighed, "I don't want to see you to suffer. If you could possibly manage some...compensation...."

The terrified Mrs. White had only one asset in the world: the trust fund her husband had left her, twelve thousand pounds for her old age.... The twelve thousand pounds was now sitting in Dr. Black's library at Tudor Close, the price he had paid for the three-part First Edition of Oliver Twist. But of course, Mrs. White didn't know a First Edition from a fruitcake. All she knew was that Dr. David Black was a man who didn't deserve to live.

**The Reverend Jonathan Green** professed an interest in only one Book, but there were many in the Reverend's life including little black books, filled with names like Happy Dan, Rutabaga, Jolly Warrior, and other charming names that horsemen like to give their racing breed.

The Reverend knew when the addiction began. He had taken
a long shot at the urging of a persuasive young lady who found it amusing to watch a man of the cloth imploring Heaven for a winner. When the horse (a 30-to-1 shot) actually won, she had new respect for the power of prayer. Unfortunately, Reverend Green also discovered a new respect for the bookmaker's craft.

The inevitable happened. His choices began to falter. Not even the most earnest prayer changed the result at the finish line. He began using money from the Church Fund. Even worse, he used money that existed only in his imagination. One day, in desperation, he placed an enormous wager on a horse named Rosy Fingers. Rosy Fingers came in a poor second, and two large, well-muscled men came to the church with a collection plate of their own. Reverend Green suffered a beating that required medical attention.

It was under sedation that the Reverend's babbling lips revealed the truth to Dr. David Black. Fortunately, the Doctor also learned that the lead horse in that fateful race had just been disqualified. Rosy Fingers was the winner, and the bet paid out enough to build a new steeple. But Dr. Black had other ideas. Reverend Green could buy something more precious—his silence.

Miss Vivienne Scarlett looked into the library and knew immediately what was wrong with the decor. There were no mirrors. A room without any mirrors was useless, in her opinion. What good was being beautiful if you couldn't catch a single glimpse of yourself?

Miss Scarlett always needed the reassurance of mirrors, because there were times when men failed her. Dr. Black was the perfect
example. When she first moved into the vicinity, she had heard the village gossips discuss his skills, his bedside manner, and his bachelorhood. Even though Miss Scarlett had a romantic "connection"—a very rich stockbroker in London, who made generous contributions to her lifestyle—Dr. Black sounded exactly like the kind of man whose adoration she craved. She decided to develop Symptoms.

Dr. Black proved highly susceptible. He was also highly ingenious. He recorded their amorous encounters on film, so that he could cherish the memories forever. But one day, he tired of cherishing and decided to profit a bit. He calmly informed Miss Scarlett that he thought her stockbroker friend might enjoy seeing her photographs.

It hadn't been easy for Vivienne Scarlett to survive on only half the income from her friend in London, but those were Dr. Black's terms. However, just before his "Great Expectations" dinner, Dr. Black put his arm around her creamy shoulders and said:

"I'm afraid the price of film has just gone up...."

**Colonel Mike Mustard** didn't even glance at Dr. Black's bookshelves. He did look at his chess table, though, his fingers itching with desire to pit one polished piece against the other. He was a dedicated player, and had once tried to organize a village tournament. It was less than successful. Mrs. Peacock played a tolerable game, and even her cook knew her way around the board, but neither presented any challenge. Vivienne Scarlett was even worse; she spent more time looking into her compact mirror than at the chessmen. Reverend Green played a solid game, but he was excruciatingly slow.
Only Dr. David Black was a worthwhile opponent, and it had been the basis of their friendship—a friendship that turned to enmity. One day, at the Colonel's house, Mustard returned from the kitchen with the tea tray, and found the Doctor examining the medals on display in a glass frame. He thought nothing of it at the time. But on the occasion of their very next game, Dr. Black paused with his black Queen twirling between two fingers, and said:

"By the way, Colonel, why don't you use the letters V.C. after your name? You're entitled to do so—since you won the Victoria Cross."

Mustard sputtered something about modesty, and Dr. Black smiled.

"Can it be that the medal doesn't belong to you? I happen to know that all V.C.'s have the recipient's name on the back. I flipped it over, and it seems to have been awarded to a Major Weaver....It would be interesting to find out how you got it."

Dr. Black never found out, because Colonel Mustard shared half of his retirement pay with him every month. The thought of those payments made his fingers itch again—for the feel of Dr. Black's throat.

It was a grueling evening for all concerned, although Dr. Black seemed to enjoy it immensely. He regaled them with a story about *A Christmas Carol*, about Dickens' almost Scrooge-like disappointment with the initial sales. "The great Christmas myth of our time," Black said with a beatific smile. "Who can forget Ebenezer, and the ghost of Jacob Marley, and Bob Cratchitt and Tiny Tim...."
His guests looked perfectly willing to forget them all and go home. But Nature conspired against them. At ten p.m., a violent thunderstorm shook the windows of Tudor Close, and drenched the area with so much rain that every access road was flooded. There was simply no choice for Dr. Black's six guests. They had to spend the night.

At midnight, the mansion was as still as a tomb, the only sounds, the steady drumbeat of rain on the roof and the slow ticking of the numerous clocks.

But within moments after those clocks had tolled the midnight hour, the rain lightened and the sound of a muffled conversation could be heard in the vicinity of Dr. David Black's library. Then, there was only silence—followed by a horrifying punctuation mark.

It was a scream of mortal agony!

At first, the scurrying guests and frightened servants couldn't find the source of that chilling sound. Dr. Black wasn't in his downstairs bedroom, nor the living room, dining room, or study. He had last been seen in the library, but that room, too, was empty.

It was Mrs. White who noticed the difference in the room—two damp spots on the carpet, directly in front of the table with a chess game still in progress. When she pointed to them, the others, reminded of the rain still spattering against the glass, looked towards the French windows that opened onto the gardens of Tudor Close.

One of the windows was ajar.

It was Professor Plum who reached it first and flung it open. A gust of cold wet air entered the library and made the guests shudder.

Colonel Mustard, with his customary military bravura, led the
way outside. The house lights lit the path ahead of them. They also clearly lit a single set of footprints embedded in the soft wet earth of the freshly-turned garden soil. They followed them in fascination, until they came to their end—a terrible end.

"Look!" Vivienne Scarlett cried. "By those rose bushes! There's something there. It looks like—a body!"

"Don't touch it! Don't touch anything!" Reverend Green said. "We must call the police!"

"But maybe he's still alive!" Mrs. Peacock said. "Maybe we should get medical help."

"Alive?" Colonel Mustard said, his voice full of contempt. "Look again, my dear woman. Look at his head!"

"Dear Heaven!" Mrs. White cried.

"And there's the murder weapon!" Vivienne Scarlett said.

Their eyes followed the bright red tip of her pointing finger. It led them to a length of lead pipe lying only inches from the Doctor's battered head. Not even the rain could wash away the blood that stained it.

They looked into each other's faces, each one only too aware that they shared a common motive—hatred of the blackmailer. If one pair of eyes showed more guilt than any other, it was impossible to tell in the darkness of the garden. But one fact was quickly discernable, and it was Mrs. Peacock who put it into words.

"Hasn't anyone noticed?" she said, with a hint of hysteria. "Look at the ground! Look how wet it is! Look at the footprints we made getting out here!"

"I don't understand," her cook said.
"Isn't it obvious?" Professor Plum said dryly. "There's only one set of footprints leading to the body. Obviously Dr. Black's own footprints."

"What's so strange about that?" Miss Scarlett said. "Somebody must have called him out to the garden, and then—struck him down!"

"Doesn't sound very likely," the Reverend said nervously. "Why would he walk out in the rain?"

"And even if he did," the Colonel said, "the murderer would have had to walk away from the scene of the crime, wouldn't he?"

"It's just amazing!" Mrs. Peacock said. "Murder in a damp garden—and no footprints! Who killed him? Marley's ghost?"

"I think we should call the police," Mrs. White said.

"And I think we should all talk it over first," the Colonel said gruffly. "The police are liable to ask more questions than some of us care to answer. Do I make myself clear?"

"He's right," Reverend Green said. "It was probably a tramp who killed him, but—the police are liable to think it was one of us!"

"We'd better get our stories straight," the Professor said.

"Now—where was Black when we all went to bed?"

"Still in the library," Colonel Mustard answered. "Cataloguing his damned books, putting them all in alphabetical order, the compulsive fool. The Reverend and I were playing chess while he worked."

"I was there, too," Miss Scarlett said, "watching them play."

"The word is meddling," the Colonel said. "I would have won the game if you hadn't told me to castle—cost me my damned bishop!"
"You should have known the Reverend is very good with bishops," Mrs. White tittered.

"And where were you, Mrs. White?" the Professor asked.

"Well, since there was only one chess board, Mrs. Peacock and I were both in the kitchen, making some cocoa."

"That's right," Mrs. Peacock said. "And where were you, Professor?"

"I was looking for a little light bedtime reading."

"You know what I think?" Miss Scarlett said, beginning to shiver. "I think we should all go back to the library right now."

By the time they reached the library, they discovered that the servants had already summoned the police. Only one of them had arrived—a small, wispy Inspector called Barnes, with a ragged moustache and very damp clothes. He looked for all the world like an old sheepdog that had fallen into a pond, and Miss Scarlett couldn't conceal a giggle of amusement.

But less than an hour later, they discovered that Inspector Barnes wasn't a sheepdog after all. After hearing their stories, and studying all the fine artifacts displayed in the library, the Inspector seemed more like a bloodhound. He quickly spotted the clues that identified the murderer of Dr. David Black. You can see the same clues yourself, by assembling the jigsaw puzzle. Can you spot the clues that Inspector Barnes did? Can you unveil Dr. Black's murderer?
THE SOLUTION