Killers in the Kitchen

Story by Henry Slesar

A Jigsaw Puzzle Mystery
Dr. David Black wasn't much of a conversationalist. He told long, pointless stories. He never remembered a joke correctly. He knew nothing of world events, current affairs, or local gossip. To put it bluntly, the man had neither wit nor charm. And yet he had friends—many friends. Because Dr. Black had something more attractive than wit, and more compelling than charm.

He had money.

Early in life, Dr. Black had learned that money was the glue that would make people stick by him, hang on his words, adhere their bottoms to the chairs in his dining room for long periods of time. He would never lack for company, as long as he didn't lack for funds.

His proudest possession was his home. Tudor Close was one of the most magnificent mansions in England, and Dr. Black was generous in sharing its magnificence with others. There was a constant stream of visitors and house guests; when Dr. Black travelled abroad, he would gladly offer its use to his friends. They slept in his beds, ate his food, drank his wine, and yet, few even troubled to leave a thank you letter. Dr. Black never noticed.

One fine day in April, Dr. Black was lying on the beach at the Hotel du Cap on the French Riviera, when he saw a bizarre figure trudging towards him, a round little man in a black suit. Improbable as it seemed, he was the image of Black's banker and financial manager, Wilfred Whacker-Smythe. The fact that
Whacker-Smythe would journey all the way to the South of France to see him, set off no alarm signal in Dr. Black’s brain. But then, it was a very placid sort of brain.

"We must talk," Whacker-Smythe said, snapping open his briefcase. "The situation is desperate. I saw it coming months ago, but I never imagined you would be so completely—improvident!"

Black could only blink at him dumbly.

"I'm talking about your Trust Fund!" the banker barked. "I knew you were squandering it, I warned you hundreds of times, but I never knew you were making these ridiculous loans without the slightest security!"

"Oh," Dr. Black said. "My loans. But I've only been helping out a few friends."

"I'd say you were extremely 'helpful'!" exclaimed Whacker-Smythe, seizing a handful of papers as if they were a clutch of dangerous snakes. "Professor Peter Plum: three hundred twenty thousand pounds! Mrs. Elizabeth Peacock: two hundred and fifty thousand pounds! Her cook, Mrs. White: her servant, mind you!—five thousand pounds!"

"The poor woman needed a new set of dentures," Dr. Black said.

"Reverend Jonathan Green: eight hundred thousand pounds!"

"It was for church reconstruction—he assured me there would be a tax advantage—"

"Miss Vivienne Scarlett: three loans—one hundred thousand, sixty thousand—last month, another two hundred thousand—"

"The poor young woman had medical expenses—"

"And last but not least, Colonel Mike Mustard: one million three hundred thousand pounds!"
"But that wasn't a personal loan," Dr. Black said meekly. "It was an investment in a motor works of some kind—"

Whacker-Smythe's round face reddened without the help of the Riviera sun. "Dr. Black," he said. "You've given those leeches more than three million pounds in the past year! Unless you collect on those debts, you will no longer be able to meet the expenses of Tudor Close."

For the first time, Dr. Black felt a chill of apprehension. "Tudor Close!" he gasped. "But nothing must happen to my home."

"It won't be your home much longer," the banker said ominously, "unless this money is recovered! I suggest you get in touch with every one of these—parasites—and demand full repayment!"

When he returned to his hotel room, dark clouds closed in on Dr. Black even though the day remained sunny. The thought of breaking such bad news to his "friends" back home was a depressing one, but it was an inescapable necessity.

Just as he sat down at the desk to compose the letters, a happy thought occurred to him. Why not soften the blow by inviting his debtors to Tudor Close? The mansion had been shut up for winter, but Spring was here, and what better time to enjoy the pleasures of the house and grounds? The idea lifted his heart. It would take only a few days to duplicate the house keys. He would send a complete set to each of them, accompanied by a carefully worded note....

"Dear Friend," Dr. Black wrote. "It's Springtime at Tudor Close, and I take pleasure in inviting you to make use of the mansion. Please come any time from the first day of May onwards...I'm enclosing a set of house keys in case you arrive before my return."
"P.S. I hope you enjoy the house, and won't mind repaying the money you owe so I can keep up with its expenses."

Dr. Black was quite pleased with his composition. As he posted the six letters to his friends, he could just imagine the smiles that would cross their faces when they heard the friendly jangle of the keys in the envelope.

What he couldn't imagine was the thought that would cross their minds as they read the postscript.

They wanted to kill him.

Professor Peter Plum, a transplanted American, was particularly vexed. It had taken planning to extract the three hundred and twenty thousand pounds from Dr. Black's bank account. He had put together an elaborate document concerning "The National Fitness Scheme," an exercise program that would assure the future well-being of British youth. He was dismayed to realize that he could have simply asked for the money, and Black would have given him a cheerful "Right-ho!"

The day after the Doctor's check arrived, the Professor tossed the document—actually a hodgepodge of government handouts and published articles—into the trash. Then he embarked on his own "fitness" scheme by boarding the next flight for America and the gambling casinos of Atlantic City.

Sadly, the Professor's chief exercise—pulling the handle of various slot machines—developed the muscles of his right arm but did nothing for his financial health. In three days, he was flying home, Tourist class, with a shattered dream.

Now, as he read the note from Dr. Black for a second time, the dream became a nightmare. If he didn't repay the loan and Black's banker investigated his background, some unpleasant facts
might emerge... The Professor jiggled the house keys to Tudor House, and decided to use them as soon as possible.

Mrs. Elizabeth Peacock was delighted to receive her keys. Surely it indicated that Dr. Black considered her more than just a friend! He had never made any romantic overtures, and she had been dismayed by the frequent visits of that overpainted hussy, Vivienne Scarlett, whose blatant sexuality couldn’t possibly work on a man of Dr. Black’s sensitivity....

It wasn’t that Mrs. Peacock was desperate to marry again. Twice widowed, she had no great urge to clutter up her life with yet another man, especially not a bore like Dr. Black. But it was important for Black to find her charming, because Mrs. Peacock had found Jimmy Maguffin charming, and Jimmy Maguffin’s investment advice had made short work of the money left to her by her two late husbands.

Mrs. Peacock had panicked at the thought of being penniless and when it became a strain even to pay her cook’s salary, she grew desperate. In tears, she confided in Dr. Black, and was immediately offered a loan of any amount. She suggested a quarter of a million pounds, and he didn’t blink an eye.

As Mrs. Peacock re-read the note from Dr. Black, she realized that the time had come to pay the piper. Unless, of course, the piper could no longer pipe....

Mrs. Blanche White opened her letter in Mrs. Peacock’s kitchen, and immediately sat down and sobbed into a tea towel.

Mrs. White thought of herself as a devout, good-hearted soul, kind to children and animals, loyal to her friends and employers. She admittedly took a nip now and then, but no one could ever
accuse her of indecorous behavior. She cherished her reputation, and was only too happy to leave her home in Manchester for a life in London—where she could leave the nasty rumors behind her.

At least, she thought they were behind her, until a certain grinning young man from her old neighborhood showed up. He remembered Mrs. White. He remembered the nasty things people used to say, about the meals she prepared for her sick husband, who got sicker and sicker with each feeding...He recalled the inquest, and the talk about poison...Did her employer, Mrs. Peacock, know that her cook was suspected of such a thing? No, the grinning man said, she probably didn’t. And if he, the grinning young man, had a few thousand pounds to leave town, perhaps she would never know....

Dr. Black had found Mrs. White sobbing in his own kitchen at Tudor Close. When he learned the reason—she needed five thousand pounds for "dentures"—he had instantly supplied the loan.

Now, Mrs. White read Dr. Black’s postscript, and had only one thought. Would her failure to pay bring on an investigation that would lead back to her life in Manchester? She would rather die! Or—would someone else have to die?

The Reverend Jonathan Green liked to tell his parishioners that he was a builder of churches. What he really meant was that he was a builder of church funds. Many years ago, the Reverend realized that his skills weren’t those of the pulpit but of the collection box. He had a knack for raising money.

Of course, there were frequent temptations. Reverend Green welcomed them since temptations tested Faith. There were times when it was only too easy to use the funds for his personal comforts, and the Reverend liked his comforts very much indeed. But
he never took the money. He simply invested it.

The Lord was kind to Reverend Green. He introduced him to Dr. David Black at a time when the Reverend was desperate for help. He had recently sunk half a million pounds into an oil exploration project that failed, and the auditors were about to make their annual examination. When he told Dr. Black about his plans for "a new community church," Black had written him a check for the entire project. The auditors found the books sound, and the Reverend was even two hundred pounds ahead of the game.

But by the time Dr. Black’s frightening footnote appeared, that money was gone, disappeared down yet another dry hole, and Reverend Green realized that he had to do something. He stared pensively at the keys to Dr. Black’s kingdom....

**Miss Vivienne Scarlett** wasn’t the least bit surprised by Dr. David Black’s generosity. Men were always generous towards Miss Scarlett, and why not? She gave them something more important than money: the momentary possession of her beauty.

Of course, there was nothing the least bit carnal about the generosity of Dr. David Black. The man was content to think of Miss Scarlett as a lovely ornament. She adorned Tudor Close in the same way that his paintings decorated its walls. He was so gentlemanly, so respectful, so undemanding—in truth, he was terrified of her—that Vivienne Scarlett became emboldened. She needed money—she always needed money—and one day she put on a little pout, shed a small tear, and found her name on a check from Dr. Black’s account. The amount was one hundred thousand pounds. It was a round figure, just like hers.

It wasn’t long before she was back, asking Dr. Black for another installment, for "medical" expenses. He didn’t hesitate to
put yet another check into her soft white hands. And within another few months, there was a third helping....

When Miss Scarlett opened the envelope from the South of France, and read the note with its chilling postscript, she was shattered. She had never repaid a loan in her life! Especially not to a man! The thought of it horrified her, and made her think terrible, unlovely thoughts....

**Colonel Mike Mustard**, with years of practice, cursed Dr. Black's invitation for a good five minutes without ever repeating an invective. **How dare he ask for the money back?**

It was true that almost a year had gone by since the Colonel convinced the Doctor to invest in the Mustard Motor Works. It was equally true that the Mustard Motor Works remained a figment of the Colonel's imagination. Oh, he had fully intended to get something started—one of these days. He was extraordinarily handy with mechanical things. He knew he could design a better motor car, if he ever put his mind to it. Unfortunately, the time had never seemed quite ripe. There were so many other things a retired Colonel could do—especially with unlimited funds. Not that one million three hundred thousand pounds was "unlimited." It was astonishing how quickly it had been dissipated by a few purchases—a little cottage by the sea, some furniture, some clothing, a new car. Well, three new cars, to be exact. One had to study the market.

Colonel Mustard's reaction to Dr. Black's request was indignation, even anger. And when a man of military background is angry enough, the only proper course was direct action. He squeezed the house keys, and decided to visit Tudor Close as soon as possible.
On the first of May, an astonishing event occurred at Tudor Close. Six vehicles stopped at the entrance and discharged six passengers. But because they arrived at different times, and never saw one another, they spent the night in the mansion and never knew others were present.

But an even more astonishing event occurred on the second day of May.

When the six guests at Tudor Close woke that morning, they came downstairs and were surprised to find they were not alone. Mrs. Peacock and her cook descended the stairs, and saw Professor Plum in the living room.

"Well, well!" Mrs. Peacock said. "I thought I heard some dreadful snoring last night!"

Vivienne Scarlett entered and let out a little cry. "What are you lot doing here? I thought I'd have the house all to myself."

"I'm sure that's just what you'd like, darling," the Professor said dryly. He turned as Colonel Mustard came in from the garden after an early morning walk.

"Good heavens!" he said. "It's an invasion!"

"Yes," Miss Scarlett said. "Of privacy! Does anyone have any idea about getting some breakfast?"

They went into the kitchen and found a white-faced Reverend Green badly shaken. When they told him they were going to prepare breakfast, the Reverend said:

"If you're looking for the large carving knife, I suggest you'll find it—in Dr. Black's back."

They followed his gaze to the kitchen floor. There, lying on his stomach, the hilt of the knife jutting from his back, lay the late Dr. David Black, fully repaid for his generosity.
It was a terrible dilemma for Inspector Pritchett, who was accustomed only to small village crimes and had never been confronted with murder. He listened in bewilderment to each denial of guilt. Not one of the six house guests saw anything, heard anything, or knew anything about the killing of Dr. David Black.

Inspector Pritchett soon realized that the case was beyond his meager power of deduction.

But just as he was about to place a call to Scotland Yard, a miracle happened. Constable Leary, the Inspector's slow-off-the-mark assistant, burst into the living room pushing a small, feisty woman ahead of him, and said:

"Look what I brought you, Inspector! An eyewitness!"

Sure enough, the lady turned out to be Mrs. Lydia Peckham, who lived right next door to Tudor Close in what used to be a gardener's cottage. She had a startling statement to make.

"I saw the murder being committed!"

A collective gasp went up from everyone in the room. But then Mrs. Peckham added a disappointing disclaimer.

"I saw the murder, only—I didn't see who done it!"

"How is that possible?" Mrs. Peacock said.

"Why, because it was dark," the lady answered snappishly.

"Because all I could see was two people in the window of the kitchen. One of them with a knife—a great big knife! And I saw that knife go right into the poor Doctor's back!"

"Surely you could tell if it was a man or a woman," Colonel Mustard said.

"No, sir, I could not," Mrs. Peckham sniffed. "It was just what you might call a silhouette, if you get my meaning."

"I'm afraid that doesn't help much," Inspector Pritchett
sighed. "So I'd better call in the Yard..."

"Wait a minute," the Constable said. "Tell the Inspector what else you told me. About all the cars arriving!"

"That's right," Mrs. Peckham said. "The cars kept coming all day. From early morning to late at night. But it was the last car that had the killer in it!"

"The last car? Are you sure?"

"Absolutely! Right after Dr. Black himself showed up, the last car arrived! I saw it stop in front of the house. I saw somebody get out. I saw Dr. Black answer the door. Then I saw the light go on in the kitchen a few seconds later. And then I saw—the murder!"

"Then that's how we'll find the killer!" the Inspector said. "All we have to know is—who arrived last!"

It turned out to be more difficult than he supposed. Because every one of the house guests claimed to have arrived first at Tudor Close.

"I know I was the first one here!" Mrs. Peacock said vehemently. "When my cook and I drove up the house was completely dark. The electricity was shut off! But I knew where the main power switch was and I turned it on. Then we went into the kitchen and put on the kettle."

Vivienne Scarlett tossed her pretty head. "That's not true! I was the one who turned on the electricity! Then I went into the kitchen and made myself a cocktail and took it into the study. I read a book and fell asleep on the sofa."

"You read a book?" Mrs. Peacock said. "That's the most blatant lie of all!"

"Really, my dear!" Reverend Green bristled. "You must have more regard for the Truth! I was definitely here first. There was
no electricity, of course, but I had no idea how to turn it on. I made my way to the kitchen and found a candle. I would have made some tea myself, but I didn’t see a kettle.”

Colonel Mustard bristled. “This is all damnable nonsense! The house was empty when I arrived, and the electricity was definitely on! I went into the kitchen and saw a kettle on the stove, but all I wanted was something to eat! All I found was some tinned sardines and biscuits and a bottle of warm beer.”

“I still say I was the first,” Professor Plum said. “But I can confirm some of the Colonel’s story. The lights were definitely working. And in the kitchen I saw a kettle on the stove and some food on the table...I assumed it was left there by Dr. Black’s maid. Damned sloppy, I thought.”

The Inspector looked more bewildered than ever. How could he tell which one was lying? How could he know for certain which guest had arrived last—and murdered Dr. Black?

Suddenly, the Inspector realized—the clues were right in front of his eyes, in Dr. Black’s kitchen!

You can see those clues, too. Assemble the jigsaw puzzle, and see if you can name the murderer!
THE SOLUTION

Blind was a six-year-old boy telling the truth. And
the thought that with the help, if there was a little of today's
and the rest, she might have saved each other's brother. No one
that saw her could see, give the horse order.

Surely she was not alone there. She had looked back, true, but then on her
the electric and put on the lights. She
had a clock that would be on the lights sweating.
and she the horse to the door before presenting the
that the lights were on, and she had the
the door. But then there was not the horse. The
sounds of the horse were the door and the
the kitchen. But then he was not on the horse. She
the door itself was the lead. She had not seen the
in the room. She had not. On the
the horse was on the track. And if she had
would have done several
try to make these are right? It was that he turned on the
and need. But that think we can see the rest of
after a thing Dr. Clark.