

Chapter Thirteen

The Bookseller

1986 / ROALD DAHL

Bonbon about a bookseller with an unusual way of extorting money from customers. In terms of characters, it is Dahl's usual collection of opportunistic grotesques. In terms of plot, the twist is a latecomer and not enough to redeem the story's flaws. "The Bookseller" really shouldn't be on this list—it is not an exceptional Dahl offering in any way. Certainly no "Lamb to the Slaughter"—and yet here it is. How to account for its presence when I know it is only average? The answer is this: Your dad relates to the characters. It has meaning to me. And the longer I do this (bookselling, yes, of course, but also living if that isn't too awfully sentimental), the more I believe that this is what the point of it all is. To connect, my dear little nerd. Only connect.

—A.J.F.

IF, in those days, you walked up from Trafalgar Square into Charing Cross Road, you would come in a few minutes to a shop on the right-hand side that had above the window the words WILLIAM BUGGAGE--RARE BOOKS.

If you peered through the window itself you would see that the walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling, and if you then pushed open the door and went in, you would immediately be assailed by that subtle odour of old cardboard and tea leaves that pervades the interiors of every second-hand bookshop in London. Nearly always, you would find two or three customers in there, silent shadowy figures in overcoats and trilby hats rummaging among the sets of Jane Austen and Trollope and Dickens and George Eliot, hoping to find a first edition.

No shop-keeper ever seemed to be hovering around to keep an eye on the customers, and if somebody actually wanted to pay for a book instead of pinching it and walking out, then he or she would have to push through a door at the back of the shop on which it said OFFICE--PAY HERE. If you went into the office you would find both Mr William Buggage and his assistant, Miss Muriel Tottle, seated at their respective desks and very much preoccupied. Mr Buggage would be sitting behind a valuable eighteenth-century mahogany partners-desk, and Miss Tottle, a few feet away, would be using a somewhat smaller but no less elegant piece of furniture, a Regency writing-table with a top of faded green leather. On Mr Buggage's desk there would invariably be one copy of the day's London Times, as well as The Daily Telegraph, The Manchester Guardian, The Western Mail, and The Glasgow Herald. There would also be a current edition of Who's Who close at hand, fat and red and well thumbed. Miss Tottle's writing-table would have on it an electric typewriter and a plain but very nice open box containing notepaper and envelopes, as well as a quantity of paper-clips and staplers and other secretarial

paraphernalia.

Now and again, but not very often, a customer would enter the office from the shop and would hand his chosen volume to Miss Tottle, who checked the price written in pencil on the fly-leaf and accepted the money, giving change when necessary from somewhere in the left-hand drawer of her writing-table. Mr Buggage never bothered even to glance up at those who came in and went out, and if one of them asked a question, it would be Miss Tottle who answered it.

Neither Mr Buggage nor Miss Tottle appeared to be in the least concerned about what went on in the main shop. In point of fact, Mr Buggage took the view that if someone was going to steal a book, then good luck to him. He knew very well that there was not a single valuable first edition out there on the shelves. There might be a moderately rare volume of Galsworthy or an early Waugh that had come in with a job lot bought at auction, and there were certainly some good sets of Boswell and Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson and the rest, often very nicely bound in half or even whole calf. But those were not really the sort of things you could slip into your overcoat pocket. Even if a villain did walk out with half a dozen volumes, Mr Buggage wasn't going to lose any sleep over it. Why should he when he knew that the shop itself earned less money in a whole year than the backroom business grossed in a couple of days. It was what went on in the back room that counted.

One morning in February when the weather was foul and sleet was slanting white and wet on to the window-panes of the office, Mr Buggage and Miss Tottle were in their respective places as usual and each was engrossed, one might even say fascinated, by his and her own work. Mr Buggage, with a gold Parker pen poised above a note-pad, was reading *The Times* and jotting things down as he went along. Every now and again, he would refer to *Who's Who* and make more jottings.

Miss Tottle, who had been opening the mail, was now examining some cheques and adding up totals.

"Three today," she said.

"What's it come to?" Mr Buggage asked, not looking up.

"One thousand six hundred," Miss Tottle said. Mr Buggage said, "I don't suppose we've 'eard anything yet from that bishop's 'ouse in Chester, 'ave we?"

"A bishop lives in a palace, Billy, not a house," Miss Tottle said.

"I don't give a sod where 'ee lives," Mr Buggage said. "But I get just a little bit uneasy when there's no quick answer from somebody like that."

"As a matter of fact, the reply came this morning," Miss Tottle said.

"Coughed up all right?"

"The full amount."

"That's a relief," Mr Buggage said. "We never done a bishop before and I'm not sure it was any too clever."

"The cheque came from some solicitors."

Mr Buggage looked up sharply. "Was there a letter?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Read it."

Miss Tottle found the letter and began to read: 'Dear Sir, With reference to your communication of the 4th Instant, we enclose herewith a cheque for £537 in full settlement. Yours faithfully, Smithson, Briggs and Ellis.' Miss Tottle paused. "That seems all right, doesn't it?"

"It's all right this time," Mr Buggage said. "But we don't want no more solicitors and let's not 'ave any more bishops either."

"I agree about bishops," Miss Tottle said. "But you're not suddenly ruling out earls and lords and all that lot, I hope?"

"Lords is fine," Mr Buggage said. "We never 'ad no trouble with lords. Nor earls either. And didn't we do a duke once?"

"The Duke of Dorset," Miss Tottle said. "Did him last year. Over a thousand quid."

"Very nice," Mr Buggage said. "I remember selectin' 'im myself straight off the front page." He stopped talking while he prised a bit of food out from between two front teeth with the nail of his little finger. "What I says is this," he went on. "The bigger the title, the bigger the twit. In fact, anyone's got a title on 'is name is almost certain to be a twit."

"Now that's not quite true, Billy," Miss Tottle said. "Some people are given titles because they've done absolutely brilliant things, like inventing penicillin or climbing Mount Everest."

"I'm talking about in'erited titles," Mr Buggage said. "Anyone gets born with a title, it's odds-on 'ee's a twit."

"You're right there," Miss Tottle said. "We've never had the slightest trouble with the aristocracy."

Mr Buggage leaned back in his chair and gazed solemnly at Miss Tottle. "You know what?" he said. "One of these days we might even 'ave a crack at royalty."

"Ooh, I'd love it," Miss Tottle said. "Sock them for a fortune."

Mr Buggage continued to gaze at Miss Tottle's profile, and as he did so, a slightly lascivious glint crept into his eye. One is forced to admit that Miss Tottle's appearance, when judged by the highest standards, was disappointing. To tell the truth when judged by any standards, it was still disappointing. Her face was long and horsey and her teeth, which were also rather long, had a sulphurous tinge about them. So did her skin. The best you could say about her was that she had a generous bosom, but even that had its faults. It was the kind that makes a single long tightly bound bulge from one side of the chest to the other, and at first glance one got the impression that there were not two individual breasts growing out of her body but simply one big long loaf of bread.

Then again, Mr Buggage himself was in no position to be overly finicky. When one saw him for the first time, the word that sprang instantly to mind was 'grubby'. He was squat, paunchy, bald and flaccid, and so far as his face was concerned, one could only make a guess at what it looked like because not much of it was visible to the eye. The major part was covered over by an immense thicket of black, bushy, slightly curly hair, a fashion, one fears, that is all too common these days, a foolish practice and incidentally a rather dirty habit. Why so many males wish to conceal their facial characteristics is beyond the comprehension of us ordinary mortals. One must presume that if it were possible for these people also to grow hair all over their noses and cheeks and eyes, then they would do so, ending up with no visible face at all but only an obscene and rather gamey ball of hair. The only possible conclusion one can arrive at when looking at one of these bearded males is that the vegetation is a kind of smoke-screen and is cultivated in order to conceal something unsightly or unsavoury.

This was almost certainly true in Mr Buggage's case, and it was therefore fortunate for all of us, and especially for Miss Tottle, that the beard was there. Mr Buggage continued to gaze

wistfully at his assistant. Then he said, "Now pet, why don't you hurry up and get them cheques in the post because after you've done that I've got a little proposal to put to you."

Miss Tottle looked back over her shoulder at the speaker and gave him a smirk that showed the cutting edges of her sulphur teeth. Whenever he called her 'pet', it was a sure sign that feelings of a carnal nature were beginning to stir within Mr Buggage's breast, and in other parts as well.

"Tell it to me now, lover," she said.

"You get them cheques done first," he said. He could be very commanding at times, and Miss Tottle thought it was wonderful.

Miss Tottle now began what she called her Daily Audit. This involved examining all of Mr. Buggage's bank accounts and all of her own and then deciding into which of them the latest cheques should be paid. Mr Buggage, you see, at this particular moment, had exactly sixty-six different accounts in his own name and Miss Tottle had twenty-two. These were scattered around among various branches of the big three banks, Barclays, Lloyds, and National Westminster, all over London and a few in the suburbs. There was nothing wrong with that. And it had not been difficult, as the business became more and more successful, for either of them to walk into any branch of these banks and open a Current Account, with an initial deposit of a few hundred pounds. They would then receive a cheque book, a paying-in book and the promise of a monthly statement.

Mr. Buggage had discovered early on that if a person has an account with several or even many different branches of a bank, this will cause no comment by the staff. Each branch deals strictly with its own customers and their names are not circulated to other branches or to Head Office, not even in these computerized times.

On the other hand, banks are required by law to notify the Inland Revenue of the names of all clients who have Deposit Accounts containing one thousand pounds or more. They must also report the amounts of interest earned. But no such law applies to Current Accounts because they earn no interest. Nobody takes any notice of a person's Current Account unless it is overdrawn or unless, and this seldom happens, the balance becomes ridiculously large. A Current Account containing let us say £100,000 might easily raise an eyebrow or two among the staff, and the client would almost certainly get a nice letter from the manager suggesting that some of the money be placed on deposit to earn interest. But Mr Buggage didn't give a fig for interest and he wanted no raised eyebrows either. That is why he and Miss Tottle had eighty-eight different bank accounts between them. It was Miss Tottle's job to see that the amounts in each of these accounts never exceeded £20,000. Anything more than that might, in Mr Buggage's opinion, cause an eyebrow to raise, especially if it were left lying untouched in a Current Account for months or years. The agreement between the two partners was seventy-five per cent of the profits of the business to Mr Buggage and twenty-five per cent to Miss Tottle.

Miss Tottle's Daily Audit involved examining a list she kept of all the balances in all those eighty-eight separate accounts and then deciding into which of them the daily cheque or cheques should be deposited. She had in her filing cabinet eighty-eight different files, one for each bank account, and eighty-eight different cheque books and eighty-eight different paying-in books. Miss Tottle's task was not a complicated one but she had to keep her wits about her and not muddle things up. Only the previous week they had to open four new accounts at four new branches, three for Mr Buggage and one for Miss Tottle. "Soon we're goin' to 'ave over a 'undred accounts in our names," Mr Buggage had said to Miss Tottle at the time.

"Why not two hundred?" Miss Tottle had said.

"A day will come," Mr Buggage said, "when we'll 'ave used up all the banks in this part of the country and you and I is goin' to 'ave to travel all the way up to Sunderland or Newcastle to open new ones."

But now Miss Tottle was busy with her Daily Audit. "That's done," she said, putting the last cheque and the paying-in slip into its envelope.

"Ow much we got in our accounts all together at this very moment?" Mr Buggage asked her.

Miss Tottle unlocked the middle drawer of her writing-table and took out a plain school exercise book. On the cover she had written the words My old arithmetic book from school. She considered this a rather ingenious ploy designed to put people off the scent should the book ever fall into the wrong hands. "Just let me add on today's deposit," she said, finding the right page and beginning to write down figures. "There we are. Counting today, you have got in all the sixty-six branches, one million, three hundred and twenty thousand, six hundred and forty-three pounds, unless you've been cashing any cheques in the last few days."

"I 'aven't," Mr Buggage said. "And what've you got?"

"I have got... four hundred and thirty thousand, seven hundred and twenty-five pounds."

"Very nice," Mr Buggage said. "And 'ow long's it taken us to gather in those tidy little sums?"

"Just eleven years," Miss Tottle said. "What was that teeny weeny proposal you were going to put to me, lover?"

"Ah," Mr Buggage said, laying down his gold pencil and leaning back to gaze at her once again with that pale licentious eye. "I was just thinkin'.. 'ere's exactly what I was thinkin' why on earth should a millionaire like me be sittin'

'ere in this filthy freezin' weather when I could be reclinin' in the lap of luxury beside a swimmin' pool with a nice girl like you to keep me company and flunkeys bringin' us goblets of iced champagne every few minutes?"

"Why indeed?" Miss Tottle cried, grinning widely.

"Then get out the book and let's see where we 'aven't been?"

Miss Tottle walked over to a bookshelf on the opposite wall and took down a thickish paperback called The 300 Best Hotels in the World chosen by Rene Lecler. She returned to her chair and said, "Where to this time, lover?"

"Somewhere in North Africa," Mr Buggage said. "This is February and you've got to go at least to North Africa to get it really warm. Italy's not 'ot enough yet, nor is Spain. And I don't want the flippin' West Indies. I've 'ad enough of them. Where 'aven't we been in North Africa?"

Miss Tottle was turning the pages of the book. "That's not so easy," she said. "We've done the Palais Jamai in Fez... and the Gazelle d'Or in Taroudant... and the Tunis Hilton in Tunis. We didn't like that one..

"Ow many we done so far altogether in that book?" Mr Buggage asked her.

"I think it was forty-eight the last time I counted."

"And I 'as every intention of doin' all three 'undred of 'em before I'm finished," Mr Buggage said. "That's my big ambition and I'll bet nobody else 'as ever done it."

"I think Mr Rene Lecler must have done it," Miss Tottle said. "'Oo's 'ee?"

"The man who wrote the book."

"Ee don't count," Mr Buggage said. He leaned sideways in his chair and began to scratch the left cheek of his rump in a slow meditative manner. "And I'll bet 'ee 'asn't anyway. These travel guides use any Tom, Dick and 'Arry to go round for 'em."

"Here's one!" Miss Tottle cried. "Hotel La Mamounia in Marrakech."

"Where's that?"

"In Morocco. Just round the top corner of Africa on the left-hand side."

"Go on then. What does it say about it?"

"It says," Miss Tottle read, "This was Winston Churchill's favourite haunt and from his balcony he painted the Atlas sunset time and again."

"I don't paint," Mr Buggage said. "What else does it say?"

Miss Tottle read on: "As the livened Moorish servant shows you into the tiled and latticed colonnaded court, you step decisively into an illustration of the 1001 Arabian nights.."

"That's more like it," Mr Buggage said. "Go on."

"Your next contact with reality will come when you pay your bill on leaving."

"That don't worry us millionaires," Mr Buggage said. "Let's go. We'll leave tomorrow. Call that travel agent right away. First class. We'll shut the shop for ten days."

"Don't you want to do today's letters?"

"Bugger today's letters," Mr Buggage said. "We're on 'oliday from now on. Get on to that travel agent quick." He leaned the other way now and started scratching his right buttock with the fingers of his right hand. Miss Tottle watched him and Mr Buggage saw her watching him but he didn't care. "Call that travel agent," he said.

"And I'd better get us some Travellers Cheques," Miss Tottle said.

"Get five thousand quids' worth. I'll write the cheque. This one's on me. Give me a cheque book. Choose the nearest bank. And call that 'otel in wherever it was and ask for the biggest suite they're got. They're never booked up when you want the biggest suite."

Twenty-four hours later, Mr Buggage and Miss Tottle were sunbathing beside the pool at La Mamounia in Marrakech and they were drinking champagne.

"This is the life," Miss Tottle said. "Why don't we retire altogether and buy a grand house in a climate like this?"

"What do we want to retire for?" Mr Buggage said. "We got the best business in London goin' for us and personally I find that very enjoyable."

On the other side of the pool a dozen Moroccan servants were laying out a splendid buffet lunch for the guests. There were enormous cold lobsters and large pink hams and very small roast chickens and several kinds of rice and about ten different salads. A chef was grilling steaks over a charcoal fire. Guests were beginning to get up from deck-chairs and mattresses to mill around the buffet with plates in their hands. Some were in swimsuits, some in light summer clothes, and most had straw hats on their heads. Mr Buggage was watching them. Almost without exception, they were English. They were the very rich English, smooth, well mannered, overweight, loud-voiced and infinitely dull. He had seen them before all around Jamaica and Barbados and places like that. It was evident that quite a few of them knew one another because at home, of course, they moved in the same circles. But whether they knew each other or not, they certainly accepted each other because all of them belonged to the same nameless and exclusive club. Any member of this club could always, by some subtle social alchemy, recognize a fellow member at a glance. Yes, they say to themselves, he's one of us. She's one of us. Mr Buggage was not one of them. He was not in the club and he never would be. He was a nouveau and that, regardless of how many millions he had, was unacceptable. He was also overtly vulgar and that was unacceptable, too. The very rich could be just as vulgar as Mr Buggage, or even more so, but they did it in a different way.

"There they are," Mr Buggage said, looking across the pool at the guests. "Them's our bread and butter. Every one of 'em's likely to be a future customer."

"How right you are," Miss Tottle said.

Mr Buggage, lying on a mattress that was striped in blue, red, and green, was propped up on one elbow, staring at the guests. His stomach was bulging out in folds over his swimming-trunks and droplets of sweat were running out of the fatty crevices. Now he shifted his gaze to the recumbent figure of Miss Tottle lying beside him on her own mattress. Miss Tottle's loaf-of-bread bosom was encased in a strip of scarlet bikini. The bottom half of the bikini was daringly brief and possibly a shade too small and Mr Buggage could see traces of black hair high up on the inside of her thighs.

"We'll have our lunch, pet, then we'll go to our room and take a little nap, right?"

Miss Tottle displayed her sulphurous teeth and nodded her head.

"And after that we'll do some letters."

"Letters?" she cried. "I don't want to do letters! I thought this was going to be a holiday!"

"It is a 'oliday, pet, but I don't like lettin' good business go to waste. The 'otel will lend you a typewriter. I already checked on that. And they're lendin' me their 'Oo's 'Oo. Every good 'otel in the world keeps an English 'Oo's 'Oo. The manager likes to know 'oo's important so lee can kiss their backsides."

"They won't find you in it," Miss Tottle said, a bit huffy now.

"No," Mr Buggage said. "I'll grant you that. But they won't find many in it that's got more money'n me neither. In this world, it's not 'oo you are, my girl. It's not even 'oo you know. It's what you got that counts."

"We've never done letters on holiday before," Miss Tottle said.

"There's a first time for everything, pet."

"How can we do letters without newspapers?"

"You know very well English papers always go airmail to places like this. I bought a Times in the foyer when we arrived. It's actually the same as I was workin' on in the office yesterday so I done most of my 'omework already. I'm beginning to fancy a piece of that lobster over there. You ever seen bigger lobsters than that?"

"But you're surely not going to post the letters from here, are you?" Miss Tottle said.

"Certainly not. We'll leave 'em undated and date 'em and post 'em as soon as we return. That way we'll 'ave a nice backlog up our sleeves."

Miss Tottle stared at the lobsters on the table across the pool, then at the people milling around, then she reached out and placed a hand on Mr Buggage's thigh, high up under the bathing-shorts. She began to stroke the hairy thigh. "Come on, Billy," she said, "why don't we take a break from the letters same as we always do when we're on hols?"

"You surely don't want us throwing about a thousand quid away a day, do you?" Mr Buggage said. "And quarter of it yours, don't forget that."

"We don't have the firm's notepaper and we can't use hotel paper, for God's sake."

"I brought the notepaper," Mr Buggage said, triumphant. "I got a 'ole box of it. And envelopes."

"Oh, all right," Miss Tottle said. "Are you going to fetch me some of that lobster, lover?"

"We'll go together," Mr Buggage said, and he stood up and started waddling round the pool in those almost knee-length bathing-trunks he had bought a couple of years back in Honolulu. They had a pattern of green and yellow and white flowers on them. Miss Tottle got to her feet and followed him.

Mr Buggage was busy helping himself at the buffet when he heard a man's voice behind him saying, "Fiona, I don't think you've met Mrs Smith-Swithin... and this is Lady Hedgecock,"

"How d'you do"... "How d'you do," the voices said.

Mr Buggage glanced round at the speakers. There was a man and a woman in swimming clothes and two elderly ladies wearing cotton dresses. Those names, he thought. I've heard those names before, I know I have... SmithSwithin... Lady Hedgecock. He shrugged and continued to load food on to his plate. A few minutes later, he was sitting with Miss Tottle at a small table under a sun-umbrella and each of them was tucking into an immense half lobster. "Tell me, does the name Lady 'Edgecock mean anything to you?" Mr Buggage asked, talking with his mouth full.

"Lady Hedgecock? She's one of our clients. Or she was. I never forget names like that. Why?"

"And what about a Mrs Smith-Swithin? Does that also ring a bell?"

"It does, actually," Miss Tottle said. "Both of them do. Why do you ask that suddenly?"

"Because both of 'em's 'ere."

"Good God! How d'you know?"

"And what's more, my girl, they're together! They're chums!"

"They're not!"

"Oh, yes they are!"

Mr Buggage told her how he knew. "There they are," he said, pointing with a fork whose prongs were yellow with mayonnaise. "Those two fat old broads talkin' to the tall man and the woman."

Miss Tottle stared, fascinated. "You know," she said, "I've never actually seen a client of ours in the flesh before, not in all the years we've been in business."

"Nor me," Mr Buggage said. "One thing's for sure. I picked 'em right, didn't I? They're rolling in it. That's obvious. And they're stupid. That's even more obvious."

"Do you think it could be dangerous, Billy, the two of them knowing each other?"

"It's a bloody queer coincidence," Mr Buggage said, "but I don't think it's dangerous. Neither of 'em's ever goin' to say a word. That's the beauty of it."

"I guess you're right."

"The only possible danger," Mr Buggage said, "would be if they saw my name on the register. I got a very unusual name just like theirs. It would ring bells at once."

"Guests don't see the register," Miss Tottle said.

"No, they don't," Mr Buggage said. "No one's ever goin' to bother us. They never 'as and they never will."

"Amazing lobster," Miss Tottle said. "Lobster is sex food," Mr Buggage announced, eating more of it.

"You're thinking of oysters, lover."

"I am not thinking of oysters. Oysters is sex food, too, but lobsters is stronger. A dish of lobsters can drive some people crazy."

"Like you, perhaps?" she said, wriggling her rump in the chair.

"Maybe," Mr Buggage said. "We shall just 'ave to wait and see about that, won't we, pet?"

"Yes," she said.

"It's a good thing they're so expensive," Mr Buggage said. "If every Tom, Dick and 'Arry could afford to buy 'em, the We world would be full of sex maniacs."

"Keep eating it," she said.

After lunch, the two of them went upstairs to their suite, where they cavorted clumsily on the huge bed for a brief period. Then they took a nap.

And now they were in their private sittingroom and were wearing only dressing-gowns over their nakedness, Mr Buggage in a plum-coloured silk one, Miss Tottle in pastel pink and pale green. Mr Buggage was reclining on the sofa with a copy of yesterday's Times on his lap and a Who's Who on the coffee table.

Miss Tottle was at the writing-desk with a hotel typewriter before her and a notebook in her hand. Both were again drinking champagne.

"This is a prime one," Mr Buggage was saying. "Sir Edward Leishman. Got the lead obit. Chairman of Aerodynamics Engineering. One of our major industrialists, it says."

"Nice," Miss Tottle said. "Make sure the wife's alive."

"Leaves a widow and three children," Mr Buggage read out. "And... wait a minute... in '00's 'Oo it says, Recreations, walkin' and fishin'. Clubs, White's and the Reform."

"Address?" Miss Tottle asked.

"The Red House, Andover, Wilts."

"How d'you spell Leishman?" Miss Tottle asked. Mr Buggage spelled it.

"How much shall we go for?"

"A lot," Mr Buggage said. "He was loaded. Try around nine 'undred."

"You want to slip in The Compleat Angler? It says he was a fisherman."

"Yes. First edition. Four 'undred and twenty quid. You know the rest of it by 'eart. Bang it out quick. I got another good one to come."

Miss Tottle put a sheet of notepaper into the typewriter and very rapidly she began to type. She had done so many thousands of these letters over the years that she never had to pause for one word. She even knew how to compile the list of books so that it came out to around nine hundred pounds or three hundred and fifty pounds or five hundred and twenty or whatever. She could make it come out to any sum Mr Buggage thought the client would stand. One of the secrets of this particular trade, as Mr Buggage knew, was never to be too greedy. Never go over a thousand quid with anyone, not even a famous millionaire.

The letter, as miss Tottle typed it, went like this: WILLIAM BUGGAGE—RARE BOOKS
27a Charing Cross Road, London.

Dear Lady Leishman,

It is with very great regret that I trouble you at this tragic time of your bereavement, but regretfully I am left with no alternative in the circumstances. I had the pleasure of serving your late husband over a number of years and my invoices were always sent to him care of White's Club, as indeed were many of the little parcels of books that he collected with such enthusiasm. He was always a prompt settler and a very pleasant gentleman to deal with. I am listing below his more recent purchases, those which, alas, he had ordered in more recent times before he passed away and which were delivered to him in the usual manner. Perhaps I should explain to you that publications of this nature are often very rare and can therefore be rather costly. Some are privately printed, some are actually banned in this country and those are more costly still. Rest assured, dear madam, that I always conduct business in the strictest confidence. My own reputation over many years in the trade is the best guarantee of my discretion. When the bill is paid, that is the last you will hear of the matter, unless of course you happen to be able to lay

hands on your late husband's collection of erotica, in which case I should be happy to make you an offer for it.

The Books: THE COMPLEAT ANGLER, Isaak Walton, First Edition. Good clean copy. Some rubbing of edges. Rare. \$420 LOVE IN FURS, Leopold von Sacher Masoch, 1920 edition. Slip cover. £75 SEXUAL SECRETS, Translation from Danish. £40 HOW TO PLEASURE YOUNG GIRLS WHEN YOU ARE OVER SIXTY, Illustrations. Private printing from Paris. £95 THE ART OF PUNISHMENT--THE CANE, THE WHIP AND THE LASH, Translated from German. Banned in U.K. £115 THREE NAUGHTY NUNS, Good clean edition. £60 RESTRAINT--SHACKLES AND SILKEN CORDS, Illustrations. £80 WHY TEENAGERS PREFER OLD MEN, Illustrations. American. £90 THE LONDON DIRECTORY OF ESCORTS AND HOSTESSES, Current edition. £20 Total now due: £995 Yours faithfully, William Buggage "Right," Miss Tottle said, running the notepaper out of her typewriter. "Done that one. But you realize I don't have my 'Bible' here, so I'll have to check the names when I get home before posting the letters."

"You do that," Mr Buggage said.

Miss Tottle's Bible was a massive index-card file in which were recorded the names and addresses of every client they had written to since the beginning of the business. The purpose of this was to try as nearly as possible to ensure that no two members of the same family received a Buggage invoice. If this were to happen, there would always be the danger that they might compare notes. It also served to guard against a case where a widow who had received one invoice upon the death of her first husband might be sent another invoice on the death of the second husband. That, of course, would let the cat right out of the bag. There was no guaranteed way of avoiding this perilous mistake because the widow would have changed her name when she remarried, but Miss Tottle had developed an instinct for sniffing out such pitfalls, and the Bible helped her to do it.

"What's next?" Miss Tottle asked.

"The next is Major General Lionel Anstruther. Here 'ee is. Got about six inches in 'Oo's 'Oo. Clubs, Army and Navy. Recreations, Ridin' to 'Ounds."

"I suppose he fell off a horse and broke his flipping neck," Miss Tottle said. "I'll start with Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man, first edition, right?"

"Right. Two 'undred and twenty quid," Mr Buggage said. "And make it between five and six 'undred altogether."

"Okay."

"And put in The Sting of the Ridin' Crop.

Whips seem to come natural to these foxhunting folk."

And so it went on.

The holiday in Marrakech continued pleasantly enough and nine days later Mr Buggage and Miss Tottle were back in the office in Charing Cross Road, both with sun-scorched skins as red as the shells of the many lobsters they had eaten. They quickly settled down again into their normal and stimulating routine. Day after day the letters went out and the cheques came in. It was remarkable how smoothly the business ran. The psychology behind it was, of course, very sound. Strike a widow at the height of her grief, strike her with something that is unbearably awful, something she wants to forget about and put behind her, something she wants nobody else to discover. What's more, the funeral is imminent. So she pays up fast to get the sordid little business out of the way. Mr Buggage knew his onions. In all the years he had been operating, he had never once had a protest or an angry reply. Just a cheque in an envelope. Now and again, but

not often, there was no reply at all. The disbelieving widow had been brave enough to sling his letter into the waste-paper basket and that was the end of it. None of them quite dared to challenge the invoice because they could never be absolutely positive that the late husband had been as pure as the wife believed and hoped. Men never are. In many cases, of course, the widow knew very well that her beloved had been a lecherous old bird and Mr Buggage's invoice came as no surprise. So she paid up even faster.

About a month after their return from Marrakech, on a wet and rainy afternoon in March, Mr Buggage was reclining comfortably in his office with his feet up on the top of his fine partner's desk, dictating to Miss Tottle some details about a deceased and distinguished admiral.

"Recreations," he was saying, reading from Who's Who, "Gardening, sailing and stamp collecting..." At that point, the door from the main shop opened and a young man came in with a book in his hand. "Mr Buggage?" he said.

Mr Buggage looked up. "Over there," he said, waving towards Miss Tottle. "She'll deal with you."

The young man stood still. His navy-blue overcoat was wet from the weather and droplets of water were dripping from his hair. He didn't look at Miss Tottle. He kept his eyes on Mr Buggage. "Don't you want the money?" he said, pleasantly enough.

"She'll take it."

"Why won't you take it?"

"Because she's the cashier," Mr Buggage said. "You want to buy a book, go ahead. She'll deal with you."

"I'd rather deal with you," the young man said.

Mr Buggage looked up at him. "Go on," he said. "Just do as you're told, there's a good lad."

"You are the proprietor?" the young man said. "You are Mr William Buggage?"

"What if I am," Mr Buggage said, his feet still up on the desk.

"Are you or aren't you?"

"What's it to you?" Mr Buggage said.

"So that's settled," the young man said. "How d'you do, Mr Buggage." There was a curious edge to his voice now, a mixture of scorn and mockery.

Mr Buggage took his feet down from the desk-top and sat up a trifle straighter. "You're a bit of a cheeky young bugger, aren't you," he said. "If you want that book, I suggest you just pay your money over there and then you can 'op it. Right?"

The young man turned towards the still open door that led to the front of the shop. Just the other side of the door there were a couple of the usual kind of customers, men in raincoats, pulling out books and examining them.

"Mother," the young man called softly. "You can come in, Mother. Mr Buggage is here."

A small woman of about sixty came in and stood beside the young man. She had a trim figure for her age and a face that must once have been ravishing, but now it showed traces of strain and exhaustion, and the pale blue eyes were dulled with grief. She was wearing a black coat and a simple black hat. She left the door open behind her.

"Mr Buggage," the young man said. "This is my mother, Mrs Northcote."

Miss Tottle, the rememberer of names, turned round quick and looked at Mr Buggage and made little warning movements with her mouth. Mr Buggage got the message and said as politely as he could, "And what can I do for you, madam?"

The woman opened her black handbag and took out a letter. She unfolded it carefully and held it out to Mr Buggage. "Then it will be you who sent me this?" she said.

Mr Buggage took the letter and examined it at some length. Miss Tottle, who had turned right round in her chair now, was watching Mr Buggage.

"Yes," Mr Buggage said. "This is my letter and my invoice. All correct and in order. What is your problem, madam?"

"What I came here to ask you," the woman said, "is, are you sure it's right?"

"I'm afraid it is, madam."

"But it is so unbelievable... I find it impossible to believe that my husband bought those books."

"Let's see now, your 'usband, Mr... Mr "Northcote," Miss Tottle said.

"Yes, Mr Northcote, yes, of course, Mr Northcote. 'Ee wasn't in 'ere often, once or twice a year maybe, but a good customer and a very fine gentleman. May I offer you, madam, my sincere condolences on your sad loss."

"Thank you, Mr Buggage. But are you really quite certain you haven't been mixing him up with somebody else?"

"Not a chance, madam. Not the slightest chance. My good secretary over there will confirm that there is no mistake."

"May I see it?" Miss Tottle said, getting up and crossing to take the letter from Mr Buggage. "Yes," she said, examining it. "I typed this myself. There is no mistake."

"Miss Tottle's been with me a long time," Mr Buggage said. "She knows the business inside out. I can't remember 'er ever makin' a mistake."

"I should hope not," Miss Tottle said.

"So there you are, madam," Mr Buggage said.

"It simply isn't possible," the woman said.

"Ah, but men will be men," Mr Buggage said. "They all 'ave their little bit of fun now and again and there's no 'arm in that, is there, madam?" He sat confident and unmoved in his chair, waiting now to have done with it. He felt himself master of the situation.

The woman stood very straight and still, and she was looking Mr Buggage directly in the eyes. "These curious books you list on your invoice," she said, "do they print them in Braille?"

"In what?"

"In Braille."

"I don't know what you're talking about, madam."

"I thought you wouldn't," she said. "That's the only way my husband could have read them. He lost his sight in the last war, in the Battle of Alamein more than forty years ago, and he was blind for ever after."

The office became suddenly very quiet. The mother and her son stood motionless, watching Mr Buggage. Miss Tottle turned away and looked out of the window. Mr Buggage cleared his throat as though to say something, but thought better of it. The two men in raincoats, who were close enough to have heard every word through the open door, came quietly into the office. One of them held out a plastic card and said to Mr Buggage, "Inspector Richards, Serious Crimes Division, Scotland Yard." And to Miss Tottle, who was already moving back towards her desk, he said, "Don't touch any of those papers, please miss. Leave everything just where it is. You're both coming along with us."

The son took his mother gently by the arm and led her out of the office, through the shop and on to the street.