

## Hit and Run

To say that William Hardy was a contented man would be an understatement. He was in fact serenely happy most of the time, with a strong sense of satisfaction with fate, which had treated him so kindly.

In spite of being past middle age, at sixty-seven he was extremely fit and in robust health. He had a lovely family on whom he doted, consisting of a charming wife, a son and daughter and four young grandchildren. Playing with them every Sunday was a joyful experience. To top it all he had a thriving business, entirely recession-proof. He was an undertaker.

Indeed, there would be no story to tell but for an incident during the final minutes of his sixty-seventh birthday. It started as a happy and memorable occasion with all the family gathered at his home, to celebrate. Listening to the happy laughter filling the room, William pondered, as he often did, on the unpredictable hand of fate which had led him to meet his wife Helen, whom he adored, who had given birth to offspring who had become an indispensable part of his life.

Most of us can probably pinpoint a day on which our lives changed for better or worse. In the case of William Hardy it was for worse, and that day was the 23<sup>rd</sup> March, his 67<sup>th</sup> birthday. At about 11 p.m. he decided to take the family to their homes. By that time the sandman had got the better of the young ones, and even their parents showed signs of fatigue. The station wagon could just about accommodate six passengers, and the party set off.

He had briefly considered ordering two chauffeured hire cars, as he had drunk a couple of whiskies and three glasses of wine with the meal. However he felt fully in control of his faculties and would make a point of driving slowly and carefully. Besides, at this late hour, there would be hardly any traffic and few people about.

The two families lived in the same district and, after dropping them off with final hugs and kisses, William headed for home. It was now close to midnight and had started to rain. Just

as he was turning the corner opposite the church, about halfway home, he saw two men, about ten yards ahead of him, quarrelling violently and pushing each other around in front of a stationary vehicle.

William wanted no part of it and accelerated. At that moment one of the men was flung into the street, falling into the path of his vehicle. Although William was travelling at no more than about 20 miles per hour, he was unable to avoid running him over. In a state of shock William stopped and got out of the car to look at the man. He lay motionless, his head at an obscure angle to his body, blood seeping from the corner of his mouth. William felt for the pulse; there was nothing. The man was dead. He returned to his car to call 999 on his mobile phone. When he heard a response he hesitated. Lightning thoughts flashed through his mind. He switched off, got out of the car and looked around; the street was deserted, the attacker obviously having fled in panic. William inspected his station wagon. There was no damage except for a small dent in the bumper and a scratch on the left wing.

He then made the fatal decision which would affect his whole life. He drove off. I am now a "hit and run" criminal, he said to himself, with a mixture of apprehension and faint amusement engendered by his state of intoxication.

By the time he arrived home he had sobered up sufficiently to contemplate the consequences of his actions. There were no witnesses, except the other man who had fled the scene and who was unlikely to report the accident. Besides it was even less likely that he would be able to identify his car. To be on the safe side he would have the tell-tale signs repaired at his garage.

The following day he anxiously scanned the pages of a few newspapers. Nothing. The news had obviously not reached the papers before the editorial deadline. However the evening paper mentioned the accident in three lines on the third page under the heading: "Hit and Run." The victim, a Caucasian male aged between 40 and 50, had not been identified.

In the weeks that followed there was no further mention and as months went by, the terrible events of that fateful night began to fade. Life continued in the pleasant routine he had become accustomed to over the years. The ringing of his office phone at 1 p.m. one Friday was to change his life forever. William took the call, as his secretary, Tracy, was out for lunch.

He had to repeat the name of his company twice before a gruff voice, with a strong Irish accent, responded.

“Mr Hardy?”

“Yes, who is that?”

“Never mind, I want to meet you.”

“In what connection?”

In connection with the 23<sup>rd</sup> March, just before midnight.”

There was no mistaking the slightly threatening undertone.

For a few seconds, William was at a loss. The only significance of the date that occurred to him was that it was his birthday. Then it hit him like a blow to the pit of his stomach. He had to collect himself before sounding calm and unconcerned.

“I don’t know what you mean, but if you want to discuss business why don’t you come along tomorrow, I will be at the office until noon.”

“Oh yes, I want to discuss business.”

The sarcasm in the voice could have been cut with a knife.

Although William took a double dose of Mogadon that evening, he spent a traumatic night with intermittent periods of restless sleep.

The following morning at the office he was unable to concentrate on the work in hand. It was almost a relief when Tracy announced a visitor who had given his name as O'Shane. This was unlikely to be his real name, but whoever he was he stormed into William's office and sat down, without being invited to. Tracy tried to hide her surprise at his uncouth behaviour, and hesitated before leaving the room.

The visitor came straight to the point.

"Look Hardy, you're in trouble. You have killed my friend and driven off without reporting the accident. This is a very serious criminal offence. Don't waste my time trying to deny it. It was your vehicle, I took the number: besides you had the damage repaired in the garage across the road the next day."

Williams had listened silently, while his brain was working feverishly trying to find a way out.

"You don't seem to realise, O'Shane that you are also in trouble; you are an accessory after the fact and there is nothing you can do without incriminating yourself."

"Can't I now? I don't care about this accessory stuff; if I go to the police you go to jail, and you can wave goodbye to your business. On the other hand I am not greedy; I am a reasonable man that knows his limitations. All I want is a grand every month, which you can easily afford, and your secret is safe with me as long as you keep your end of the bargain."

William Hardy considered the proposition calmly. One thousand pounds a month was no big deal, particularly if he could account for it as a tax-allowable expense. On the other hand he had heard enough about blackmail to realise the danger of the screw being tightened by ever-increasing demands. He had to try calling the blackmailer's bluff.

"O'Shane, forget it, £1,000 is out of the question. Go to the police if you like; I will take what's coming to me."

O'Shane got up brusquely. He grinned maliciously and made a circular motion with his index finger on his forehead. "I am not negotiating," he said, and walked towards the door.

Williams was in no position to argue. "Wait O'Shane, I agree. I will put you on the payroll, it's safer that way." They arranged that O'Shane would come to collect on the first Monday of every month, just after office hours when William was alone.

The arrangement worked smoothly and in fact soon settled down to a regular business routine. The initial atmosphere of understandable hostility between blackmailer and victim had given way to a feeling of accommodation which suited both parties, to the extent that O'Shane was offered a drink every time the transaction was completed. William often speculated how much worse the situation could have been. The payments amounted to no more than about £9,000 annually after tax, representing a very modest percentage of his profits. A minor problem arose with the auditors, who were understandably inquisitive about the addition to the small staff that was never to be seen. William muttered something about an old friend he was trying to help, and there the matter rested.

Months went by, and William's life of contented tranquillity was fully restored with the O'Shane problem no more than a minor irritant. However, the devil may rest but he never sleeps, as the saying goes. The bombshell came one Monday evening with O'Shane's announcement that he was getting married.

"You must understand, Hardy, that this changes things. £12,000, not very much to start with, might just be enough for a bachelor. A couple with a kid on the way needs rather more. There is also inflation. From next month I will be collecting £4,000 and I don't want to hear any ifs or buts."

William took a deep breath. So that was it. The screw was being tightened a couple of threads, and even that might not be the end. The new demand was a double blow. The amount was way beyond his possibilities and, besides, could not possibly be disguised as a legitimate business expense. He tried to sound jovial, congratulated O'Shane on his

engagement and suggested doubling his retainer to £2,000. The hostile, uncompromising look in the blackmailer's eyes convinced him that any attempt to negotiate was fruitless.

"Forget it" added O'Shane, as if to confirm the obvious.

With some effort Hardy pretended to reconcile himself to the new arrangement and, while pouring the customary Scotch on the rocks, he considered his options. He could still, at this late stage, surrender to the police and confess. There were "pros" and "cons" to this solution. On the positive side, he would teach O'Shane a lesson. As a blackmailer he would go to jail for a number of years. Against that, his own future would be in a shambles. He would have a criminal record, quite apart from problems with the Inland Revenue for tax evasion. The only other possible solution was to get rid of the blackmailer.

Williams explained to O'Shane that he could not remain on the payroll, and future payments would have to be in cash. This gave him a whole month to devise a perfect murder scenario. To kill O'Shane would be no problem; a dose of the right poison in his whisky would see to that. However, to decide which substance was most suitable for his purpose required research. Hardy was no toxicology expert and his knowledge of poisonous substances was very superficial. An encyclopaedia would supply the necessary information, and being a methodical man he first jotted down the specification for which he was looking.

1. The poison had to work quickly.
2. The only method of administration open to him was by ingestion, although he read that inhalation and subcutaneous injection would have worked faster.
3. It should be odourless and tasteless.
4. It should be obtainable without having to identify himself.

After careful study he found that no one substance would satisfy all these criteria.

Strychnine was a possibility. It would be very easy to get hold of as vermin killer, and it was tasteless and odour-free. It would act in about ten minutes, but he was not certain that O'Shane could be made to stay that long. In the end Hardy opted for cyanide in the form of Scheele's Acid, containing five per cent anhydrous prussic acid. This was available in the UK for various industrial uses, and a lethal dose of one or two millilitres would cause death in seconds rather than minutes. The victim would collapse with complete loss of muscular power. There was however one snag: cyanide compounds have a faint taste of bitter almonds. Nevertheless he decided that, all things considered, he had to live with this minor flaw.

The next problem to be dealt with was the disposal of the body. It was at this point that he had a brilliant inspiration. After all, he was burying people legally all the time. What would be easier than to have one coffin accommodate two corpses? It was only a matter of logistics and timing.

The routine presented no problems. He often screwed down the coffin lid himself before the funeral drove off. However, timing had to be right. He would have to wait for a lean corpse, probably a woman, to have enough room left to take the heavily-built O'Shane. A few payments might have to be made before everything fell into place, but that was a small price to pay.

He could not suppress a wry smile to himself as he realised how much a quotation from the German classics applied to his circumstances: "Such is the curse of evil deed that it forever evil does beget." In his case however one evil deed would cancel out the other and he would escape retribution.

The opportunity to realise his plan came sooner than expected. On the Monday when the first increased payment was due, the corpse of a Mrs Ann Armstrong, a woman of 35, was delivered for burial the following day.

Hardy had withdrawn £4,000 in £50 notes from his bank and now awaited O'Shane's arrival with a calm determination which surprised even him. As soon as O'Shane arrived Hardy handed him the envelope. Having counted the money and found it correct, the visitor rose to leave. "Let's have our drink" suggested Hardy, and started filling the glasses, one of which contained the dose of Scheele's Acid, just enough to kill with only the slightest whiff of bitter almonds.

Hardy was trying to get O'Shane to linger over the drink, but he seemed to be in a hurry and saying "Bottoms up", drained the glass. Hardy started to panic. If the poison did not work before he left the office the plan would be in tatters. O'Shane reached the door and was just about to open it when he turned round with an expression on his face which Hardy would not forget as long as he lived. O'Shane's eyes reflected pain and sudden comprehension before he collapsed.

It was more strenuous than Hardy would have thought to heave the body into the coffin on top of the woman's corpse. Perhaps there was some truth in the generally-held belief that a dead body was heavier than a live one, although nobody has ever offered a rational explanation for this paradox. He screwed down the coffin lid with the feeling of extreme relief for a job well done.

When the coffin was collected the following morning for burial, he stood at the door to watch the hearse move off. At that moment he was seized with a feeling of undiluted euphoria, followed soon by extreme fatigue. For a few days thereafter he scanned the newspapers for any mention of O'Shane's disappearance. There was nothing. Apparently he wasn't missed by anyone and very likely the story of impending marriage was simply a fabrication.

As weeks and then months went by, the whole episode faded from his memory until it assumed a dreamlike quality. The day of retribution was Friday 13<sup>th</sup> April, when a letter was delivered with the morning post:

“Dear Mr Hardy,

Whereas application has been made to me Henry Coburn -Smith for permission to exhume the body of the late Ann Armstrong from the place of burial in St Mary’s churchyard for the purpose of medical examination to provide evidence of administration of poison, I do hereby, under the powers vested in me, grant licence for the exhumation of the body of the said Ann Armstrong from the said grave.

You are hereby requested, as the undertaker of the said body, to attend at 10 a.m. on the fifteenth day of May for the purpose of identifying the coffin before removal from the church-yard.

I am,

Your obedient servant...”

[2782 words]