



The Witness

by **Ronald Morris**

"I demand to see the queen," said the inspector.

"On what business?" said the equerry.

"I'll tell her when I see her."

"This is outrageous."

The equerry spoke with the disdainful drawl of one secure in his power to decide who should or should not get to see members of the royal family, and even the head of security with his "demand" could be refused or made to wait.

Double doors at his back led into an audience chamber. There were armed guards on the doors. Like them he had a military bearing, his tall lean figure that of a senior officer out of uniform who made no effort to conceal his contempt for what he regarded as the lower ranks. An aquiline nose and deep brooding eyes added to his aloof manner.

The inspector was not in uniform, but he too was powerful in the way he could influence affairs. His broad shoulders, steady manner and the aggressive forward tilt of his powerful head made most people wary of tangling with him. He turned

to the guards and with a slight movement of his head dismissed them. When they were gone the equerry was the first to speak.

"Now then, explain yourself."

This courtier is being too curt, thought the inspector. He began slowly.

"On the way back from the funeral I was informed of the circumstances of the young lady's death." He was speaking "inspectorese", the staid language of one who would expect to repeat his words in a court of law where a single mistake could destroy his case. "It seems she fell into a brook. She had made a coronet of weeds and went to hang it from a tree that leaned over the water. A branch broke."

"And then?"

"She drowned. But not at once. Air trapped in her clothes kept her afloat and during this period" - more "inspectorese" - "she sang." He paused. This man is not stupid, he thought, but he hasn't caught on. It's staring him in the face and he can't see it. He went on: "Eventually her clothes got so heavy with water that she was pulled under."

The courtier was a devious man. That's how he came to be a courtier. There were rules to the game: keep a poker face at all times; when in doubt be silent; keep inferiors waiting; confuse by

doing the unexpected.

He startled the inspector when he played the last card and walked past him without a sound, went to the door through which the guards had left and snatched it open. The long corridor was empty. He stepped into it and closed the door after him. He would stand there for a few minutes and let the inspector stew. He had not been at the funeral but he had heard about it. That was his business. Every whisper in the palace came back to him, but sometimes they were Chinese whispers that got distorted on the way or petered out, like the background to this untimely death. She drowned. Everybody knew that. But why had he not been told of the *circumstances* of her drowning. He ran the list of informers through his head, wondering which to lean on for having failed him. Her brother had quarreled with the priest - that much he knew - who declared openly that her death was doubtful and only pressure from above had persuaded him to allow her to be buried in holy ground. Then the man she might have married appeared and brother and lover had fought in the open grave. The inspector, always on duty - did he *ever* sleep? - had had to separate them.

He returned to the ante-chamber in the manner he had left, swinging the door open with a sudden movement that would surprise an eavesdropper. The shock of the empty room, of not finding the inspector where he left him, sent him racing to the

double doors.

"Looking for someone?"

The voice came from over his left shoulder and a darkened corner of the room. He whipped round to see the inspector in a comfortable chair. The flash of anger at being fooled was all too clear to the seated man, who looked back with a sardonic smile as if to say "I too can play silly games." He got up and walked towards the doors. When he stopped, both men were almost exactly where they had been before. They knew each other well, though they had never been friends. They had grown up in the shadow of the palace, sons of loyal servants and already well groomed to follow them. Too intelligent to be wasted as flunkies, they had been put on a fast track and here they were today, one an adviser to the royal family, the other in charge of security. The adviser, in a rare touch of humility, asked for advice.

"You'll have to go over all that again. I can't approach the queen without knowing what has happened." And he uttered two words he never expected to use to anyone. "Help me."

The inspector went back to his chair, talking softly as he went. His companion followed and sat nearby.

"Let's go back to the moment when everybody realised that the young woman had gone mad. In a

place crawling with attendants she goes unattended. She wanders into the countryside and gathers weeds, crow-flowers, nettles, daisies and long purples and these she weaves into a garland. She comes to the brook and decides to hang it on a tree overhanging the water. A branch breaks. We know all the details. That's the trouble. We know *too many* details - the weeds she picked, how she came to be in the tree, the way her garments kept her afloat. And the singing. That's the clincher. Someone heard her singing and could even distinguish what she sang - not the latest songs, but snatches of old tunes. And if they heard they must have been witness - must have seen her garments become heavy with water to the point where they pulled her down. And if they witnessed all this then we are talking something other than accident or suicide. Manslaughter, perhaps, or worse."

He fell silent and for a while both men stared at the floor, deep in their own thoughts. Beneath the smooth facade of palace life, a facade they spent their lives maintaining, something was rotten.

"Poor Ophelia," said the equerry, "Poor, poor Ophelia." He rose and as he did so the inspector raised his hand as if he would detain him and tell him more, but he was too late. His listener had turned swiftly as he rose and headed for the double doors. And so he missed the final astonishing detail. Everything he had said, all those details, had been uttered by the queen

herself and had been passed on to him by that plague of palace life - the eavesdropper. Her Majesty had to be warned that whoever it was who had supplied her with the details had to be traced, questioned and perhaps silenced. Which is why he demanded to see her.

The double doors opened to the equerry's knock and closed behind him too quickly for the inspector to get a glimpse beyond. Not that he minded. He knew every inch of the palace, from the grand staircase inside the main entrance to the back stairs where spies, money lenders, courtesans and other nasties were given secret access to the royal chambers.

The doors opened after a few minutes. The equerry was standing there.

"Her Majesty the Queen will see you."

From a distance the queen looked young and regal in the high-backed chair at the centre of the room, but close up her face had the pallor of the imprisoned. The skin drawn too tightly over her face and hands made them skeletal. Her thin mouth was turned down at the corners, whether with contempt or weariness it was hard to tell, but it looked as if it hadn't laughed in years. Her dress was simple, but of inexpressible elegance, her jewels few, but of fabulous design and cost. He recognised the four men standing behind her chair, his own staff. He approached the queen,

hands by his sides, slightly clenched, and gave the stiff bow expected of him, head only, with the slightest dip of the shoulders. The equerry stood to his left. The queen studied them both in silence and then, with her gaze at a spot between them, she spoke.

"Arrest them both."

As the guards surged forward the two men realised that the witness was the queen herself. ▶

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