

The Moonlighter

“What do you think of him then... Mr Rodgers? Rich, professional... interesting? What do you think?”

Rosie pondered Gwen’s question for a moment.

“Those three – Yes. But I’ll add handsome and mysterious.”

“Mysterious? Why?”

“I introduced myself on Friday. He’s quite charming... but... mysterious. Nicely so.”

“What did he say?”

“It’s what he didn’t say. He’s not got a regular job. Working on his own project he said. No wife, but not widowed or divorced. Not renting; he bought the place. No car. I know what he isn’t, but not much about what he is.”

“Handsome. Young. Single. Self-supporting. That’s good enough for me!”

“You’re shocking Gwen!”

“I try to be! Got to get this fish home to mum now – see you tomorrow.”

“Bye.”

The young women parted.

Mr Rodgers had moved into the detached slate house halfway up the hill from the harbour of the tiny fishing village. From there down to the little harbour snaked a narrow row of grey terraces with roofs green with moss despite the salt winds that blew off the Irish Sea.

He was not a local. His accent was educated and distant, his clothing smart, and city-like. He had purchased 15 Trewennan Lane through an estate agent in Newquay, and the first in the village to meet him was Douglas Menhenick in the hardware store. Mr Rodgers had paid cash for a number of items including an extension ladder and 40 metres of stout cord. He had ordered two more ladders and some structural timbers, and paid in advance, also in cash. Mr Menhenick was delighted that the payment had not required a receipt, and hurriedly added the notes to his ‘holiday fund’ in a small toolbox which he replaced beneath a loose floorboard at the back of the shop. Mr Rodgers was welcome anytime!

The next day Gwen got to the newcomer first.

“Good morning Mr Rodgers,” she said, curtsying slightly and smiling.

“It’s nice to have a gentleman in the village. I trust you are settling in well?”

“Thank you... Miss... er...?”

“Please... call me Gwen. It’s my name.” She giggled.

“Yes Gwen, very well, except I am so very tired. The sea air is very bracing.”

She looked over his manly features and saw that his eyes were dark-rimmed and hollow, as though he had spent the night restlessly pondering some great problem, or contemplating complex philosophical dilemmas. But whatever he thought of when he was trying to sleep, he was still wonderfully noble and well-proportioned. And probably wealthy. And unattached.

“Bracing... Yes. I find it so too Mr Rodgers. Are you walking to the shops?”

“Yes, to the hardware store, then to get a few groceries.”

“Perhaps we could walk together?”

“By all means Miss... Gwen. Certainly.”

She wondered whether she should take his arm, but decided against it.

Don't rush things.

She had a book to return to the tiny local library, and they parted at the library door. When she came out again she waited in the porch until she saw Mr Rodgers returning up the hill.

He carried a grocery bag in one hand, and in the other a large galvanised bucket with a hinged lid, and a landing net for fishing.

He smiled as he drew near. Gwen shuddered slightly and smiled back.

"Have you got everything you wanted Mr Rodgers?" she asked, trying hard to sound provocative, and failing.

"Yes thank you. You?"

"I just had to take a book back." She glanced at the net. "Are you an angler then?"

"What? Oh this – the net. No no. It's for my present project. I have a few other items being delivered later today, then I'll be nearly ready to start."

Gwen was intrigued. She saw a chance to steal a march on Rosie.

"What is your project Mr Rodgers, if it's not a rude question?"

“No – not rude at all. But I’d rather not say just now. The preparations won’t be complete for another few days. Wouldn’t do to spoil the surprise for everyone.”

“Everyone?”

“Yes, everyone. Have to wait for the right time. You’ll see.”

Gwen’s curiosity almost drove her to insist on an explanation, but she bit her tongue and they walked on to Mr Rodgers’ house. He thanked her for her company and went inside. She hurried to Rosie’s home and rapped on the door. Rosie’s mother let her in and she made her way to her friend’s room.

For the next 20 minutes they discussed what Mr Rodgers might be doing, but could draw no conclusions, and finally Gwen had to leave to help her mother with the washing. They arranged to meet the next day and tackle the handsome newcomer together.

Later that afternoon a van arrived outside 15 Trewennan Lane and unloaded a large crate. Two men in overalls carried it into Mr Rodgers’ house. Another, smaller van pulled up shortly afterwards, and Mr Menhenick took in a long, thick rope with a hook on the end, some

heavy duty brackets and a bag of long nails, once again in exchange for banknotes.

The following morning the two young ladies sat on the wooden bench just down the hill from number 15 and smoked cigarettes. They chattered and laughed, trying to pretend that it was something they often did when the weather was nice, which it was. They were of course waiting to ambush Mr Rodgers.

Around ten o'clock he left home and strolled down the lane towards them. When he drew level Rosie bid him good morning, and Gwen fluttered her eyelids a little.

"More shopping Mr Rodgers?" asked Rosie innocently.

"No – just a constitutional to the harbour and back. Nice to relax for a while I thought."

"May I ask how your er... project is coming along?" asked Gwen, then bravely, "What is it you do. Your job?".

"Ah Gwen. What do I do? Well... you might say I'm a part-time inventor, and a full time thief."

"A thief!" exclaimed Gwen.

“What do you steal Mr Thief?” asked Rosie, giggling.

“Nothing yet. I’ve been too busy with my invention.”

“Then what do you invent?” appealed Rosie, “Do tell us that at least!”

A short, slightly awkward silence followed before he answered.

“I have made a machine that reduces the size of objects.”

“A slimming machine!” Rosie clapped her hands.

“No – a device to shrink very large objects to a very small size. It cannot be used on living creatures.”

“So what will you shrink Mr Rodgers?”

He paused as if pondering whether a reply might give too much away.

After a moment he shrugged dismissively, as though he no longer cared.

“I plan to shrink the item I wish to steal.”

“How clever!” exclaimed Rosie, “What will you steal? A diamond necklace perhaps?”

“No – it’s far larger than a diamond necklace.”

“A hoard of rubies in a golden casket?” suggested Gwen, wide-eyed in a pretence of amazement.

“Bigger than that.”

“A huge wad of banknotes from a bank?”

He smiled again. “What I intend to steal is worth more than mere money Rosie, far more.”

She dropped her voice to a whisper. “Someone’s heart?” The girls giggled in embarrassment. Mr Rodgers laughed.

“No! After my robbery money will be useless, and sadly every heart in the world will be broken.”

“How mysterious! What will you steal?”

“You’ll see.”

“Soon Mr Rodgers? Can’t you tell us now?”

“Yes – soon. And No – I can’t tell you now. Sorry.’ Still smiling, he turned on his heel and strolled off towards the harbour, glancing back for a moment and nodding to them.

“When the time is right you will be the first to know. I promise. Good day ladies.” And off he went.

The young women looked at one another.

“He doesn’t look like a robber,” said Rosie. “Too good-looking.”

“He doesn’t sound like one either. Too well-spoken.”

“Perhaps he’s an upper-class robber who does it for fun. Handsome and upper-class...”

“And still single. That’s odd isn’t it?”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth Gwen,” smiled Rosie.

Gwen affected an upper class man’s voice, “would you care to come for a ride Miss...?”

They both giggled again and made their way to their respective homes, aware that perhaps their competition over the newcomer was becoming slightly more serious.

That week Mr Rodgers was observed by local residents erecting several ladders on his roof. Gwen and Rosie were the only people with sufficient audacity to sit on the bench and watch him. He didn’t seem concerned with their perlustration, and stopped every so often to give them a cheerful wave.

His construction consisted of extension ladders lashed together with cord and joined by large brackets to a scaffold of long timbers.

The village was abuzz with theories, but to the girls’ credit they did not speak of the pending robbery, although in fairness they had reasons for not doing so. They had no wish to fall out with Mr Rodgers, or to appear

gullible if the whole thing was a joke. So they watched and waited, but didn't add to the gossip.

After four days tying things to his chimney stacks and to each other, Mr Rodgers met them in the lane as he headed to the grocery store.

"Have you finished now Mr Rodgers?" ventured Rosie.

"Finished? Ah yes, finished. I see. Finished the preparations, yes. But not the robbery. It won't be long now; I'm waiting until it's full."

"What's full?" asked a puzzled Gwen.

"Why the moon of course. Full moon's always better for robberies. You get more when there's a full moon."

"More what?"

"More of what you're stealing of course. Good morning ladies."

With an enigmatic smile he nodded slightly and continued down the hill.

The full moon was two nights distant. Mr Rodgers had been seen occasionally on his roof at night, staring upwards at the stars. Sometimes he stood at the top of his ladders, and one evening the young ladies strolled past and spotted him there.

"Whatever is he doing?"

“Looking at the sky it seems.”

“Perhaps he watches the stars and can’t afford a telescope.”

“Yes. Perhaps that’s what he’s going to steal. A telescope – to look at the stars and moon.”

“Perhaps he just likes bats. Is there a word for a bat-watcher?”

“Batographer?”

“No. A batographer would be someone who writes about bats.”

They continued their walk, determined to keep an eye on him the following night, full moon; the night of the anticipated theft.

Surprisingly the next night was as dark as though there was no moon at all. Black clouds had hung heavily over the coast all day, and there seemed little difference when dusk crept into night: no shadows, no outlines; just blackness. The two friends made their way slowly towards Mr Rodgers’ house.

To their surprise they met him walking down the lane, the large bucket just visible in his hand, its lid tied down with twine. A thin sliver of light flicked from the rim of the bucket, although it may have been a glint reflected from nearby windows.

“Good evening ladies.”

“Good evening Mr Rodgers. You’re out late this evening,” prompted Rosie. “Fishing?”

“Gracious me no! I have to finish my tasks, that’s all.”

“Tasks?”

“The last part of my robbery.”

“Is that’s what’s in your bucket – your stolen goods?” Gwen asked. It sounded very forward, but Mr Rodgers replied matter-of-factly.

“That’s right. My booty.”

“Booty?”

“The proceeds of my theft. At long last I have what I’ve craved for so long.”

Excitement overcame the two girls.

“What is it? Do tell us!”

“The moon.”

“The moon?”

“The moon.”

“I don’t understand you Mr Rodgers, said Rosie.

“I have the moon in this bucket.”

They laughed politely at his joke.

“Really, what is it Mr Rodgers?” asked Gwen.

“The moon.”

“Ah, you are a one Mr Rodgers. And what, pray, will you do with the moon?”

“I’m going to drown it.”

“Drown the moon?”

“Yes.”

More laughter, but less sure of themselves now. Things were becoming a little strange.

“Why?”

“It keeps me awake.”

“Oh,” stammered Gwen, out of her depth now.

“Really, what are you going to do with it; the moon?” Rosie came to the rescue.

“Really. I’m going to drown it. Fill the bucket with water so it sinks, and drop it off the jetty where the water is deep and dark. I shall be able to sleep properly at last. No more full moons to concern me.”

Uneasily they bade him goodnight and walked rather quickly up the hill.

“I wonder what was really in the bucket,” said Rosie.

“I don’t want to know anymore,” said Gwen.

The next day’s radio news reported the disappearance of the moon.

Scientists had suggested that the earth would change its orbit and inevitably tides and climates would change; nights would grow darker.

Evaluation was being made about the wider effects of this monstrous calamity in space.

The girls found Mr Rodgers by the harbour, throwing bread to the fish.

“Have you heard the reports Mr Rodgers? The moon vanished!” blurted Gwen.

“I know. I had lovely sleep last night when I got home from the jetty.”

The girls didn’t know what to say, and after a hasty goodbye they beat a smart retreat. Mr Rodgers stayed a while before strolling up the hill, whistling a jolly tune; no longer looking at all tired.

The evening broadcast stated that scientists had reported the moon growing smaller and falling in the direction of the Cornish coast before vanishing. They said the earth was expected to fly into the sun within a few weeks, but urged no-one to worry, assuring listeners that the world’s

best scientific minds were already close to a solution. They did not mention the mass panic gripping world's cities and towns. And in the village nothing greatly changed.

“Mr Rodgers is very odd isn’t he?” said Rosie to Gwen. “I was just thinking, if he really stole the moon, and the earth flies into the sun, he’ll get burnt up like the rest of us.”

“That’s true.”

“Doesn’t make sense to steal the moon and get burnt up on the sun.”

“I don’t care much. I never really liked him anyway. Serves him right I say.”

“Yes. Serves him right.”

The bucket sat in the darkness, lid slightly dislodged, light gleaming out in a fan-shaped sweep. Just off the jetty, a shoal of plaice swept the bottom mud, foraging. They joined a school of young whiting gathered round the bucket.

The fish peeped through the aperture at the bucket’s contents. What they saw surprised them. It was something they normally saw only through the ever-shimmering surface of the sea. And they’d missed it these past

two nights. Now it was in their own salty domain. Through the crack they saw a silvery orb with little craters and pock-marks. They liked it coming to visit. It attracted light-loving crustaceans and bivalves.

A feast.

The moon was a welcome visitor.