

MACMILLAN READERS

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**INTERMEDIATE LEVEL**

RUTH RENDELL

# A New Lease of Death

Retold by John Escott



## ‘He Was Hanged ...’

It was five o'clock in the morning, and Detective Inspector Mike Burden was standing by the window of Chief Inspector Wexford's office. Outside in the corridor<sup>11</sup>, Burden could hear Wexford saying good night – or good morning – to Mr Griswold, the Chief Constable. Minutes later, he saw Griswold's car drive away.

Burden turned round when Wexford came into the room. The Chief Inspector was a big, powerful-looking man with a loud voice. He was tired and his heavy grey face looked a little greyer than usual after the long night.

‘Griswold's just given me this,’ said Wexford, sitting down in a chair. He showed Burden an envelope. ‘It's a letter he received from the Reverend Archery.’ Then Wexford took a letter from the envelope and unfolded it. ‘All Griswold told me was that this Archery is a good friend of his, and the letter is about “that terrible man Painter”. I'll have to answer it.’

‘Who's Painter?’ asked Burden.

‘He was a murderer who was hanged fifteen or sixteen years ago,’ Wexford replied.

Burden looked over the Chief Inspector's shoulder as he read the letter aloud.

*Dear sir, You will remember the case<sup>12</sup> of Herbert Arthur Painter. I understand that you were in charge of<sup>13</sup> it so I decided to come to you before making my enquiries<sup>P</sup>.*

‘What does he mean, “enquiries”?’ said Burden.

‘I don't know,’ said Wexford. ‘He's going to phone me this morning. It was the first murder case I ever investigated<sup>14</sup> on my own,’ he went on, angrily. ‘There's no mystery. Herbert Arthur

Painter killed his ninety-year-old employer by hitting her over the head with an axe<sup>15</sup>. He did it for two hundred pounds.'

'She was killed in her own home, wasn't she?' said Burden. 'One of those big old houses off the Stowerton road?'

'It's called Victor's Piece,' said Wexford.

'I think I know it. It was an old people's home until last year. It's very run-down<sup>16</sup> now – I suppose it will be pulled down.' Burden tried to remember the murdered woman's name, but couldn't. 'What was she called?' he asked.

'Rose Isabel Primero,' said Wexford. 'When she was a child she lived at Forby Hall – her family had owned the place for hundreds of years.'

Burden knew Forby well. 'Perhaps Archery is her relative,' he said.

'I don't think so,' said Wexford. 'The only relatives old Rose Primero had were her three grandchildren. Roger Primero, her grandson, lives at Forby Hall now but he didn't inherit<sup>17</sup> it, he had to buy it.'

'There was a family called Knyaston at Forby Hall,' said Burden. 'But that was many years ago.'

'That's right,' said Wexford. 'Mrs Primero was born a Knyaston. She was nearly forty when she married Dr Ralph Primero. They came to live at Victor's Piece when he retired. They weren't rich. When the doctor died in the 1930s, Mrs Primero was left with only about ten thousand pounds. There was one child, a son, but he died soon after his father.'

'Was Rose Primero really still living alone when she died?' asked Burden. 'Even at such<sup>18</sup> an old age?'

'She had a maid<sup>19</sup>,' said Wexford. 'Alice Flower. She's still alive. She was about seventy when Mrs Primero was killed. Alice had been with her for fifty years. She and Painter were both Mrs Primero's servants, but Alice sometimes gave him his orders.'

'Was Alice frightened of Painter?' asked Burden.



*'Painter killed his ninety-year-old employer by hitting her over the head with an axe.'*

'She hated him,' said Wexford. 'He was employed by Mrs Primero as a driver and gardener. After the doctor died, Mrs Primero and Alice Flower tried to manage without help. But by 1947 Mrs Primero was in her eighties and Alice was nearly seventy. Also, the old lady never did anything, it was all left to Alice. Mrs Primero wasn't an easy person to work for.'

'Or to like?' said Burden.

'Probably not,' said Wexford. 'When she was too old to go to church, she made Alice go instead. *Made* her. When her son died, he left his wife and kids without much money. Mrs Primero said that she was happy to help them, but only if they came to live with her. But she loved her grandson, Roger, and she had one good friend. I'll tell you about her later.'

'There was a garage with a large room over the top of it in the gardens of Victor's Piece,' Wexford went on. 'Mrs Primero put an advertisement in the *Kingsmarkham Chronicle* for a young man to work in the garden and drive the car. He could live in the flat above the garage. Mrs Primero had the room divided into three rooms. A lot of people answered the advertisement, but she chose Painter for the job.'

'Was his wife employed by Mrs Primero, too?' asked Burden.

'No, only Painter. The child – her name was Theresa, I think – was only two years old. Mrs Primero didn't want her in the house with her mother.'

'Not a nice woman,' said Burden. 'What about Mrs Painter?'

'She was very pretty and quite small. She was a bit afraid of her husband.'

'So Mrs Primero and her maid lived alone at Victor's Piece,' said Burden.

'Yes,' said Wexford. 'The garage was about thirty yards from the back door of the big house. Painter only went up to the house to carry in the coal<sup>20</sup> and get his orders.'

'Oh, yes, the coal,' said Burden. 'Wasn't there something important about that?'

'Painter was supposed to<sup>21</sup> cut wood and to carry coal up to the house at mid-day and again at six-thirty in the evening. He always complained about it because he didn't like going out to get it on winter evenings. He wanted to bring all the coal for the day at eleven o'clock in the morning, but Mrs Primero wouldn't let him do that. She wanted him to bring some in the morning and some in the evening. Do you want me to go on?'

Burden nodded.

'By September 1950,' said Wexford, 'Painter had been working for Mrs Primero for three years, but he was always asking her for more money. He knew that she kept money in the house.'

'And an old handbag containing *the* two hundred pounds,' said Burden.

'Yes,' said Wexford. 'It happened on the evening of September 24<sup>th</sup>, a cold wet Sunday. Mrs Primero had sent Alice to church. She left at about quarter past six. Painter brought the coal in at six-thirty – and left with two hundred pounds. Mrs Primero was found at seven o'clock. She was lying on the living-room floor near the fireplace in a great pool of blood. There was blood on the walls and on her chair, and there was an axe in the fireplace. It, too, was covered in blood.'

Suddenly the phone rang and Wexford stopped to pick up the receiver. When he had finished listening, he said, 'Archery's coming at two o'clock.'

'What's it all about, did he say?' asked Burden.

'He'll tell us this afternoon,' said Wexford. 'I've got to go out, but I'll meet you for lunch at the Olive and Dove Hotel.'

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It was just before one o'clock when Burden arrived at the hotel. Wexford came in five minutes later. They talked over lunch.

'Mrs Primero died without making a will<sup>22</sup>,' said Wexford. 'Remember I told you that she'd only got ten thousand pounds?'

That was divided between Roger and his two younger sisters. He's a rich man now, but he didn't get his money from his grandmother. He's a businessman.'

'How old is he?' asked Burden.

'He was twenty-two when his grandmother was killed which means he must be about thirty-eight now. The sisters were younger. Angela was ten and Isabel was nine.'

'Roger spoke at the trial<sup>23</sup>, I remember,' said Burden.

'Roger visited his grandmother that Sunday,' Wexford said. 'He was working in a solicitor's<sup>24</sup> office in Sewingbury and often had Sunday tea at Victor's Piece. Roger took his little sisters there a few times, and they were all very happy together.'

'Old people usually like kids,' said Burden.

'They had to be "the right sort of children". Angela and Isabel, yes. And she liked young Elizabeth Crilling.'

Burden stared at him. 'Elizabeth Crilling?!'

'Don't you remember? Elizabeth – who was five years old at the time – found Mrs Primero's body,' said Wexford. 'She didn't come to the trial because she was too young.'

'No, I don't remember. I'd only just left school,' said Burden. 'But I don't understand. You said Mrs Primero only liked "the right sort of children"? She thought Elizabeth Crilling was "*the right sort of child*"? Elizabeth who is now always in trouble with the police? Her mother's half crazy and they live in Glebe Road.' Glebe Road was in one of the poorer, rougher<sup>25</sup> parts of the town. 'They have no money. How could Mrs Primero have known *them*?'

'In September 1950 Mr Crilling was still alive and the Crillings lived opposite Victor's Piece,' said Wexford. 'Mrs Crilling was about thirty and not "half crazy" at the time. A woman called Mrs White lived next door to her.'

Burden remembered the two small white houses in the lane. 'But that means Mrs Crilling isn't fifty yet,' he said. 'Well, she looks much older.'

'Mental illness always makes a woman look much older,' said Wexford. 'Mrs Crilling has been in and out of mental hospitals for years.' He looked at his watch. It was 1.45pm.

'How did Mrs Primero and the Crilling woman become friends?' asked Burden. 'I suppose they *were* friends?'

'Oh, yes,' said Wexford. 'Mr Crilling had been an accountant which, in Mrs Primero's opinion, made his wife a "lady". Mrs Crilling often visited Victor's Piece, and she always took Elizabeth with her. The child called Mrs Primero "Granny Rose", like Roger and his sisters.'

'So she "visited" that Sunday night and found Granny Rose dead?' said Burden.

'Mrs Crilling had made a party dress for Elizabeth,' explained Wexford. 'She finished it at about six o'clock. The child put it on, and they went to show it to Mrs Primero. Mrs Crilling waited until Alice had left for church because Alice didn't like her.'

'It was about twenty minutes after six,' Wexford went on. 'But Mrs Primero was asleep and Mrs Crilling didn't go in. She just knocked on the living room window. When the old woman didn't wake up, she went away and returned later. Importantly, she noticed that there was *no coal* in the fireplace, so she knew that Painter hadn't been in.'

'So Painter came in and killed the old woman between Mrs Crilling's visits,' said Burden.

'She and the child didn't go back until seven o'clock,' replied Wexford. 'They went in by the back door, called "hello!" or something, and walked on into the living room. Elizabeth went in first.'

'And saw the body!' said Burden. 'Terrible! So what's Archery's connection with all this?'

'We shall soon know,' said Wexford.