



THE DIRECTOR

1 How Green Was My Valley (1941)

Every morning at seven o'clock Mrs Peavey took her Doberman pinschers, Mufty and Treacle, on a two-mile walk. The route never varied – and the dogs normally led the way – but on this June morning it was Mrs Peavey, bedecked in tweeds, who was striding ahead, her face set in an expression of determination.

The reason for her present mood lay in a documentary she'd watched the previous evening. The programme, about infidelity, had stirred up painful memories, and Mrs Peavey had poured a great deal of vitriol into her diary after she'd retired to bed. Her husband, Frank, had shown a disturbing interest in other women near the end of his life – a diabetic, he had died of an insulin overdose a decade earlier – and since that time Mrs Peavey had taken a jaundiced view of those reneging on their marriage vows.

Her ill humour had resumed in the morning. Although thoughts of Frank had receded into the background, her mind had settled on the subject of her next-door neighbours' marriage. Mrs Peavey was the sort who, even if she'd resolved her own problems, was able to transfer her feelings to someone else. In this instance, she sympathized with Leonard, the husband, who for various reasons she suspected of being deceived by his wife.

The surrounding trees and hedgerows of the Essex countryside had hardly looked more beautiful. In true English summer tradition it had poured with rain for the entire night and the dew glimmered off the grass in the crisp morning air. A pair of robins fluttered overhead, adding a touch of colour to the spectacle, and no doubt Wordsworth, had he been present, would have dashed off something about sunbeams falling upon distant hills, the whisper of a passing zephyr...



Mrs Peavey, however, was immune to such delights. Swinging the dogs' leads with grasshopper-threatening gusto, she pursued her own train of thought, a film of abstraction clouding her small grey eyes.

Oh, she was a right one, that Deborah. What was it she'd said the other day? Oh, yes – 'I'd prefer it if you left the bedroom cupboards and drawers alone.' The words themselves didn't amount to much – but honestly! The tone in which they'd been delivered, the whole body language! Mrs Peavey had been about to ask if she was addressing her – the person who so kindly offered to clean their house – but she'd already waltzed out the room.

'Cheap little tramp,' Mrs Peavey muttered.

Because – yes! – she was a tramp, even if the expression was somewhat surprising issuing from an Englishwoman of staid appearance. (Mrs Peavey more than a little resembled Clarissa Dickson Wright, one of the Two Fat Ladies.) Mrs Peavey had in recent years become addicted to watching films – inspired by having a film critic as a neighbour? – and so, inevitably, words and phrases – 'Cheap little tramp' had cropped up in Chicago – had found their way into her speech.

She continued on her morning's walk, still thinking, furiously.

What Leonard, dear, sweet Leonard, saw in her – Deborah – well, that was anyone's guess. He was quite different to his wife: much nicer, friendlier and funnier. Heh, heh! (She had to laugh.) The look on his face when she'd donned that mask from Snow White! Perhaps (you never knew) – perhaps he'd even spoken to Deborah about their long and interesting conversations; and perhaps Deborah (you never knew) had felt jealous about it, felt somehow under threat—

Jeepers, that was a thought! (You might be onto something there, Agatha Jean!) Not that anything could happen between her and Leonard, of course. But there was that moment, wasn't there, when he'd stepped on his glasses? They were up close, face to face, and it would have been so easy—



But – no. Nothing had happened. She had resisted and so, too, had he, though the look in his eyes showed that he'd realized the danger...

A key point in her deliberations had been reached and Mrs Peavey momentarily slowed her pace – before abruptly (as if to dismiss an idea) rubbing a mitten under her nose and leaving behind a snail-like imprint.

Yes, there you had it – there you had it all over: the difference between her and most of the population. Where was the self-restraint nowadays, the sense of loyalty? By gosh, even dogs had superior moral values. At least you knew where you stood with a dog. And – not forgetting the other thing about dogs – if they did get a bit frisky, you just took them to the vet's, dealt with the problem at source. Mrs Peavey negotiated a stile and squelched her way down a hill the other side. It was a pity in many ways you couldn't round up some of the young men today and—

Hold on a minute. What was that doing there?

A black sports car was parked at the bottom of the slope, at the turning. Mrs Peavey's thin lips pressed together, nostrils flaring. The previous night she'd heard a car coming up the road and had waited expectantly at the living room window. But the vehicle, the same sleek black thing, hadn't been carrying a visitor for her. It contained Deborah Fleason, together with a man she didn't recognize. The car had screeched past her front gate on its way to the Fleason house, the only other residence further up the road.

And now it was back again, blocking the way. Perhaps it had got stuck in the mud, though it didn't look too boggy. Some people were so gauche, driving around in swish cars and littering the countryside. But – wait a second. Someone was still in it, slumped against the steering wheel. Drunk, probably. Treacle was already pressed against the door inspecting the occupant.

Lengthening her stride and plonking her size eights squarely in the mud, she rapped on the driver's window, receiving no reply. It was the same man all right, the one she'd seen driving past last night. She opened the door, jerking her head to one side. Dear heavens, what a smell.



He'd been sick. She put one hand up to her mouth and, with the other, attempted to fend the dogs away, both of whom were now nosing around the insides of the car. The driver himself, though, seemed insensible.

'Mufty! Treacle! Sit!'

She tapped the man on the shoulder and, receiving no response, pushed a bit harder. Oh, jeepers... Oh, ohhh. He swayed over into the passenger seat, his mouth gaping open. Reaching out more tentatively this time, she touched his hand...

Cold. Dead cold.

The old lady staggered back. The dogs were barking insanely, and she lurched forward again to shut the car door, gasping for breath.

The walk home passed in a blur. Mrs Peavey was hypnotized by the dead body she'd just encountered, a man cut down in the prime of life. The most terrible question was going through her mind.

Hadn't Leonard told her yesterday, with a gleam in his eye, that his wife's lover was coming over for dinner and that he intended to 'slip him something extra'?

Surely, though – surely – that had all been a joke? They had laughed over it for goodness' sake.

No, no, impossible. Just impossible. Leonard simply wasn't the sort... Wasn't the sort at all.

As a matter of fact the subject of Mrs Peavey's thoughts was, at that precise moment, applying the finishing touches to the challenging assignment he'd set himself. He had been in turmoil for the last six weeks. But now it was over, finally over, the culmination of a sequence of events that had had their origin in the middle of April.

When he'd first suspected his wife of betraying him.



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