

VICTOR CANNING

Victor Canning (1911-1986) wrote over a hundred short stories, alongside thirty-three thrillers, eighteen other novels, four historical romances of the Dark Ages, three children's books, a book of travel pieces, three stage plays, four radio plays and thirty-five TV scripts.

The *Daily Telegraph* obituary of 26 Feb 1986 said: *Canning regarded himself primarily as a storyteller. "Give me a knife and fork," he once said, "and I will make a story out of them."* However, it seems that he never got around to writing the knife and fork story and so, as a tribute to this wonderful writer in his centenary year, I have tried to repair the omission with this tale as he might have told it.

John Higgins

Shaftesbury, 16 June 2011.

A KNIFE AND FORK

The man from Sparkman and Ancaster, Estate Agents, Auctioneers and Valuers, introduced himself as Peter Wilkins. He was middle-aged, wearing a three-piece suit, and had a rather prim expression.

“Anything to do with Wilkins the solicitors?” George asked.

“He’s my father. Naturally we work together quite often, when there are valuations to be done for probate.”

Armed with a digital camera and a laptop, the valuer now went through all the rooms on the ground floor. George and Blanche followed him, but nobody said very much.

“I’m afraid I haven’t found much of interest,” he said half an hour later. “This is about the best item.” He pointed to a mahogany box holding a set of cutlery. “Arthur Price of Sheffield and solid silver, not plate. This could fetch three thousand pounds. Unfortunately it doesn’t seem to be complete.”

“What’s missing?” Blanche asked.

“A knife and a fork. There are six of everything else, but just five large knives and five large forks. Everything looks to be in good condition. He didn’t use this stuff every day, obviously. You haven’t seen any more around the house, have you?”

“No,” said George.

“Pity. If they still sell that design you could get replacements. Otherwise it’s going to knock a few hundred off the value.”

Blanche looked at the silver shield decorating the top of the mahogany box.

***PRESENTED TO MAJOR DESMOND CROCKERTON
BY HIS COMRADES IN THE ROYAL HAMPSHIRE REGIMENT
IN TOKEN OF FIFTEEN YEARS OF GALLANT SERVICE
25 APRIL 1971***

“Seems quite a generous leaving present,” she said. Money was important to her, and she liked to understand what made men generous, or rather what made some men generous some of the time.

“Rather an unusual gift for an unmarried man,” replied the valuer. I would have thought some kind of display piece would be more suitable.”

“He probably asked for it,” said George. “He knew he was going to live on his own. Practical man. As for the price, there was probably a bit of conscience money in it. The injury that got him his discharge, that could have been partly the fault of some of his gallant comrades. But he lasted another forty years. Good going. I heard there was a district nurse who called once a week, but nobody else. With his deformity, he didn’t invite company. Hardly ever left the house, in fact.”

“Poor chap. Did you know him well?”

“Hardly at all. I met him once when I was about eight years old. Must have been about 1983. Mum and Dad had brought me along, but I rather blotted my copybook. He had lost an eye when the grenade went off, and half his left cheek was gone. I think I whispered something on the lines of *If you put a knife and fork on his*

shoulders he would look like a half eaten dinner. I think he heard me. Anyway, Mum and Dad always looked embarrassed when his name came up after that, and I don't think there was any more contact."

"Are your parents alive?"

"No. Mum died last year, Dad four years ago. Mum was Major Crockerton's cousin, so that makes me a first cousin once removed, I think."

"So he made you his heir?"

"Oh no, he didn't leave a will," Blanche broke in. "It took the solicitors months to find out that George was the only surviving relative. They wrote to the Army Records office and sent somebody to the National Archive at Kew."

"No doubt that will show up in the bill they present," said George sourly. He too thought money was important. "However, I think your boss said the house might go for quarter of a million in spite of the condition it is in, so there should be something left over."

All three of them now went up the stairs to the main bedroom. Clothes were hauled out of the wardrobe and divided into two piles, one for the charity shop, one for the dustbin. The same division was made of the paperback books, old spectacles, cuff links and shoes. In a second bedroom there was another wardrobe largely filled with bed linen.

"Can't really put a value on this," said the valuer. "You might want to hang on to the less used stuff. Otherwise it could be handed over to a charity."

"Same goes for these suitcases, I suppose" said George, dragging out two bulky cases from under a pile of blankets. "Hang on. This one's not empty."

The case was not locked. Inside was a black deed box with the initials D.L.C. on top, but this was locked.

"Desmond Lionel Crockerton," said George. "Better see what's in it. Are you any good at opening things?"

"I think that should go back to the solicitors," said the valuer.

"Come on, let's have a look first." George looked around for anything to prise open the box, eventually spotting a metal shoe horn. "Just the thing," he said, and began levering the lid up. Within a few seconds there was a satisfying *crack* and the box was open. Clearly in sight was a long rectangle of white paper in a buff envelope, a legal document.

"That has to go back to the solicitors," said the valuer.

"Not till I've read it," said George. He drew the document from its envelope. It was several sheets long.

"Please give that to me," said the valuer after a pause.

"No," said George. "It's personal."

"It looks like a will to me."

"Not to me. Do you smoke? No? Funny, isn't it? Now that everybody seems to have given up smoking, you can never get a match or a lighter when you need one."

"You can't just destroy a will."

"Who said it's a will. It's a highly intimate and rather pornographic description of my mother. For the sake of family honour I am going to get rid of it so that it can't be read by anyone else."

He walked out of the room and went briskly downstairs, followed by Blanche and the valuer. In the kitchen he turned on a gas ring and pressed the ignition button. By the time the valuer had caught up with him, the document was well alight.

“This is highly unethical,” said the valuer. “I am going to have to report this to my superior.”

“And if you do I shall simply deny that there ever was a will. This was just a personal document that I do not want anyone else to see.” By this time George dropped the burning paper into the sink, and it was clearly beyond retrieval. As the last of the smoke curled away, he ran the cold tap and flushed away the ashes.

“Disgraceful!” With a furious expression, the valuer turned and marched out of the house, muttering under his breath.

“Is he going to make trouble?” asked Blanche.

“I don’t think there’s much he can do. We just deny that there ever was a will. Where’s his evidence?” He looked with satisfaction at the almost clean sink.

“What was in the will?”

“I didn’t manage to read it all, but the main beneficiary was going to be his Regimental Association. Christ, the Regiment was disbanded years ago, but it still has a museum somewhere, Winchester I think. They would have got all that lovely money. Look, you’ll back me up, won’t you?”

“Of course I will, darling.”

There was a long pause. Then Blanche asked, “Wasn’t there something else in that deed box?”

“Yes. A knife and a fork.”

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***Carver and Wilkins, Solicitors
Church Walk, Barnstaple***

George Campbell Esq
14 Thurston Gardens
Swindon

Dear Sir,

Re: the estate of the late Major Desmond Crockerton

Following information supplied by the firm of Sparkman and Ancaster, Estate Agents, this partnership initiated a search for a will made by Major Crockerton. After exhaustive enquiries among practising and former solicitors in the Barnstaple area, we eventually found one among the papers of Messrs Aberdylly and Onions, where it had been unfortunately misfiled, hence not coming to light at the appropriate time.

This will is now being proved. When probate is granted, we expect to send you by registered mail a knife and a fork, the legacy to which you are entitled under the terms of the will.

Yours faithfully,
Arthur Wilkins