

Excerpt from

## CRITICAL POINT *by Geoffrey Waring*

Visit [www.geoffreywaring.nz](http://www.geoffreywaring.nz) to buy the book, or contact the author

Patience sighs and crosses off another theatre on the entertainment page. ‘It’s hard to get into a decent show this late. We could try *The Mousetrap*, it’s been running for years.’

‘Getting out of bed before lunch would probably help,’ I say and become aware of the door buzzer.

‘Hey, you two, if you want dinner get your hands off each other and answer the door,’ calls Brenda from the kitchen. ‘I’m all floury.’

Patience pushes the phone aside and gets up from the couch. ‘I’ll see who it is.’

I watch her go, easy and lovely, and the absence of her warmth and touch is a sudden loss. As I turn another page the buzzer intrudes again. There are words, and she appears at the lounge door looking worried.

‘It’s the police. They’re asking if you’re here.’

‘The police?’

‘Yes.’

I try to make the transition from Saturday night out with Patience to police at the door and don’t succeed. ‘Tell them to go away. We have more important things to do.’

Patience doesn’t move.

‘Someone’s having you on,’ I persist.

She looks unsure. ‘Doesn’t sound like it. He said he’s a detective from Paddington Green station.’

‘Tell him to wait.’ At the window I pull the curtain back. A police car, complete with attendant constable, is double-parked outside our entrance.

Patience’s hand is on my shoulder. ‘It *is* the police. You’d better talk to them, hadn’t you?’

‘What’s going on?’ asks Brenda from the kitchen.

‘No idea. The Jacks wants to talk to me. Hang on a sec.’ At the door I push the speak button. ‘This is Gary Sunnex. What do you want?’

‘Mr Sunnex, I’m Detective Sergeant Horton from Paddington Green station. We’d like to talk to you. Can you let us in?’ All I can think of is our Saturday going west. ‘Not until I know what it’s about.’

‘We can’t discuss this over the intercom.’

‘It’s not convenient. Can you come back on Monday?’

There’s a silence. ‘I believe you know a Graham Cowley?’

I’m about to tell him no, until Graham’s mournful face returns. It’s my turn to hesitate. ‘Well, I have met him once,’ I concede. Let them make the running.

‘He’s had an accident.’

I can’t think of any meaningful response. Patience’s face is one great question.

‘Come up.’ I push the door button.

Sergeant Horton has the constable with him, a lived-in face running to a double chin, and a darting look seeking secrets.

‘We should all sit down,’ Horton instructs. We spread ourselves around and wait. The constable stands at the lounge door.

‘Will you introduce me to these ladies?’ Horton starts.

‘My sister, Brenda Sunnex, and her flatmate, Patience Twentyman,’ I explain. ‘I’m visiting. How did you know I was here?’

He ignores my question. ‘It’s a nice flat, ladies. Been here long?’

‘Two years,’ Brenda says, ‘but what’s that got to do with this Graham Cowley? We’ve never heard of him.’

‘I don’t expect you have unless you live in Basingstoke,’ concedes Horton. He switches his attention to me. ‘You are the first officer of a Boeing aircraft that flew into Lasham yesterday, Mr Sunnex. Correct? The Affreight Express agent at Stansted supplied your address.’

‘So that’s how you found me? That’s right, and Graham Cowley is a manager with our maintenance contractor at Lasham. My captain, Bill Gunn, introduced me to him yesterday. What’s all this about? What accident?’

‘Mr Cowley was found deceased in a van at six a.m. this morning. It seems he had a heart attack while driving home last night. His wife called local police at seven this morning to report him missing. Mid-morning a farmer found a van on his property. It had gone through a hedge and overturned in a gully.’

‘Bloody hell! I’m sorry to hear that, he’s got six kids you know.’ I thought of his wife too. He wouldn’t have to worry about being without women now.

The girls look upset. I ask Horton, ‘Have you contacted Captain Gunn? He was meeting Cowley on Monday to hand over our aircraft.’

Horton spreads his hands slowly apart. ‘No one’s been able to contact him, or your flight engineer. That’s Mr Salim Njami, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. But what’s this got to do with us? It’s an accident, isn’t it?’

Horton purses his lips and looks directly at me. ‘The local police thought so, too, until his wife asked why the van was thirty miles away in the wrong direction up a muddy lane in the Surrey Hills.’ Horton is very still.

Brenda wrings her tea towel and Patience looks stricken.

‘We’re taking statements from everyone who’s had contact with him over the last few days because his movements are out of character. It’s normal procedure. I’d like you to come to the station and give a statement.’

Patience draws in a sharp breath. ‘Can’t you take one here?’

Horton’s restless eyes swing to her. ‘It will be more convenient for everyone. We don’t want to interfere with your supper, do we?’ His words hold a hard edge.

‘How long?’ I ask.

‘An hour or two at most.’ I make resignation motions to Patience. ‘I might as well get this out of the way. We aren’t having any luck with the shows, are we?’

‘In that case I’ll come with you,’ she offers.

‘There’s no need,’ says Horton promptly.

‘I’m a practising lawyer,’ says Patience.

Horton looks more interested. ‘Are you? Mr Sunnex is not under caution and your presence is unnecessary.’

Patience looks unhappy. ‘Neither is it excluded,’ she responds warily.

I sense an argument brewing and don't want additional distractions from our weekend; settle this quickly. I take her hand. 'If I sort this out now I'll be back for dinner and we'll have all tomorrow to ourselves.'

Patience isn't convinced and does unhappier. 'All right, I suppose so, but if you have any doubts phone me and I'll come.'

'Why should I have doubts?' I peck at her cheek. 'Just don't drink all the wine.'

'Bring your passport, please,' says Horton.

Deep within the ugly pile that is Paddington Green station, Horton leads me along beige corridors to an even blander solicitor's consulting room, according to the sign on the door. It is windowless, has a table with a recorder, a phone, four chairs and a buzzing fluorescent light.

'I don't know about you but I fancy a coffee?' says Horton as we take our seats.

'I'm having dinner shortly,' I remind him.

'Very well, we'll get started. Ask Mr Bartholomew to come in, will you?' he tells the constable.

I feel a twinge of uneasiness. What can they want from me? I'll just give them the facts, though what use they are to the police I can't imagine.

'Who's Bartholomew?'

Horton is non-committal. 'He's assisting us on this matter.'

Bartholomew turns out to be a square-faced man in a suit, severely economical with words, who barely acknowledges my presence. Horton starts the recorder and I relate events from the time we landed at Stansted to my boarding the train at Basingstoke. Bartholomew's silent presence is disconcerting.

'So you've never seen or heard of Graham Cowley before you arrived at Lasham yesterday?' asks Horton for the third time.

'As I've told you, he used to work for Affreight before I joined but I've never set eyes on him before yesterday. Captain Gunn will confirm that. Here's his phone number.' I offer my open notebook. 'Call him. What's with this third degree anyway? I'm happy to sign a statement *and* I'm getting hungry.'

Horton glances at my notebook.

'That number is his father's house in Glasgow. Your captain is expected there but he hasn't shown yet.'

I think immediately of the woman in red leggings. He's probably in some hotel with her. 'So? He's driving up, he said. I imagine he doesn't have to send position reports to his father as he goes.'

'Hmmm,' says Horton. 'Officer Bartholomew has some questions for you.'

'Officer of what?'

Bartholomew breaks his silence. 'Her Majesty's Customs and Excise Investigation Branch. You crewed an aircraft from Fort George direct to Stansted and cleared inbound before positioning to Lasham. Is that correct?' His words are clipped, leaving no space to intercede.

Customs? My unease grows. 'Yes, that's correct.'

'You carried no cargo? The aircraft was empty?'

'Well, er, ah ...' I'm trying to connect seemingly unconnected events and cast about for words. 'We did a three-engined ferry flight, an abnormal operation. Of course it was empty.'

Bartholomew pounces. 'What about the pallets in the forward hold?'

'Those? They were aircraft components for AVECO. Charter aircraft often carry spares kits to avoid being stranded somewhere. It's not cargo.'

'Are you sure the pallets contained aircraft parts?'

'I fly the bloody aircraft, mate. I don't load it. Go ask AVECO.'

He frowns. 'We already have, Mr Sunnex, and you are correct. Aircraft components were on the pallets.'

‘So why the hell ask me!’ I’m fighting smoke and having trouble containing mounting irritation. ‘What’s this got to do with me or that poor bugger Cowley?’

‘Rather a lot, I’m afraid,’ cuts in Horton. I begin to recognise the good-cop-bad-cop scenario.

They let me stew for half a minute then Bartholomew leans over the table. He has bad breath. ‘While the tow truck was righting Cowley’s van, three gold bullion ingots fell out of a toolbox. Not the sort of thing one would expect in your average toolkit, is it, Mr Sunnex?’

It is almost a physical blow. We look at each other. My expression must mirror the utter surprise I feel.

Bartholomew slowly eases back into his chair and Horton takes up the chase. ‘That’s one thousand two hundred ounces in all, Mr Sunnex. Over half a million US dollars, and that’s a lot of VAT. I don’t think Mr Cowley was a bullion dealer taking it to the Bank of England, do you?’

What can I say? A vision returns: a sweating African face in the reflected glare of our taxi lights waiting for me to pass the bundle of banknotes I hold. In dimmer light at the back of the hold, small boxes are stacked on a pallet while the engine roars and shadows of soldiers forming the chain leap in time with the flashing red of the anti-collision beacon.

My mind clicks into gear. What starts to fall into place is unbelievable. Could that be the reason for...? How could I have been so blind? No! It can’t be.

I ask Horton, ‘Are you suggesting this gold came from our aircraft?’

‘We’re not *suggesting* anything at all, Mr Sunnex. When customs searched AVECO’s stores earlier today they found seven more gold ingots in boxes purporting to hold hydraulic shut-off valves and electric pumps. Your aircraft now has a writ on it, and until enquiries are complete you won’t be going anywhere.’

I don’t have to try to look shocked. ‘Bullion?’ The implication comes home.’ Are you suggesting I’m involved? For chrissake, I’m crew. I fly. I’m not a loader, and I’ve never seen a gold bar in my life!’

‘That’s as may be, Mr Sunnex,’ interjects Bartholomew, ‘but if you have no involvement in this matter our enquiries will confirm it. In the meantime we require your passport. I must advise you are not obliged to surrender it, but if you don’t we can lawfully detain you. Voluntary surrender will avoid such unpleasantness and I’m sure your sister’s flat is preferable to our remand cells.’

I nod wordlessly.

Horton stands to extract the tape. ‘That’s it for now. We’ll get your statement typed and signed, and then you can go, but you are required to remain at your current address. Is that understood?’ He holds a hand out. ‘Your passport?’

‘I want to make a phone call.’

Horton pushes the phone across the table.