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Remember To Ring Twice

By

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a pseudonym of Edith Caroline Rivett.

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When P-c Tom Brandon told his friends that he wanted to get into the CID, they laughed at him.

Tom rather enjoyed the humdrum of patrol duty in the East End of London, but because he came from the Norfolk Broads he spent his free time sailing below the Pool of London. After sailing, he often turned into one of the riverside pubs, and sat over a pint.

He had two reasons for sitting in pubs: one was to get accustomed to the sound of East End cockney, which he found hard to understand at first; the other was to study human nature.

One March evening he sat in the bar of The Jolly Sailor in the Isle of Dogs. He heard the publican say: 'Evening, Mr. Copland,' and then a husky voice said:

'Why, Joe Copland, you're the very bloke I 'oped to see. The same again, twice, chum.'

Copland and his friend took their drinks.

'Cheers, Joe! 'Ow's your job?'

'Lousy, Charlie. I'm ruddy well browned off with it.'

'Arr . . . I reckoned it wasn't your job, Joe. Not good enough. Now I got a little idea. You know old 'Enery 'Iggs, 'im with the little baccy and newspaper shop along the road?'

'You bet I do, and a nice little business that is, too, Charlie. A gold mine, not half. I wouldn't mind that business myself.'

'Arr . . . you're telling me,' wheezed Charlie. 'Now strictly between you and me, 'Iggs is thinking of retiring, and we've been into it together.'

'My friend Bert Williams wants to come in on it, but we needs a spot more capital. Now I says to Bert, wot about putting in Joe Copland as manager? There'd be a nice little flat for you and Clarrie over the shop, Joe.'

'It's 'ard on your missis not 'aving an 'ome of 'er own. That's your auntie's 'ouse you live in, ain't it, and Clarrie must get fed up lookin' after the old lady.'

'Now the point is, can you put up the needful?'

'Five 'undred pounds it'd be, but a fair share o' the profits to you, plus bonus, and the flat rent free. What abaht it?'

'Oh, come orf it,' groaned Joe Copland. 'What's the use o' talking like that? I haven't got five hundred quid.'

'Sorry to disturb you gents. Got to shut that there window. It's a cold wind.'

The barman, with a long pole, fumbled at the sloping fanlight at the top of the window. Joe Copland said irritably:

'Here, let me do it. If you'd a ha'porth of sense you'd fix up two running cords, one to open and one to shut the thing.'

Glancing round at Joe, Tom Brandon saw that he was staring miserably up at the window. Then Joe caught Tom's eye and grinned. 'That window only wants a couple of eyelet holes and some cord,' he said. 'What flats some blokes are. Good night all.'

Some blokes *are* fools, too, thought Tom Brandon soberly. Egging that chap on to get £500 . . . and Auntie with a house of her own and Joe her only relation and Clarrie fed up with looking after Auntie. If that isn't asking for trouble, I don't know what is.

'Well, if it ain't Clarrie Copland! 'Morning, Clarrie. You're an early bird with your shopping.'

' 'Morning, Mrs. Lane. I like to get out early. Along of Auntie, see. I give her her breakfast and leave her in bed while I do the shopping. Don't like her to be about the house alone, she's that shaky, poor old girl.'

Constable Brandon heard this conversation beside the green-grocer's stall in Penny Street. Clarrie Copland? The name rang a bell. Then Brandon remembered the Jolly Sailor a week ago, and the man who hadn't got five hundred pounds.

Keeping his eyes open for a car reported stolen, Brandon continued on his beat and noticed that Mrs. Copland and her friend Mrs. Lane were walking just ahead of him, both laden with heavy shopping baskets. The street they were in was a narrow one, with gaunt brick houses on either side each front door approached by a steep little flight of steps.

'I mustn't stay, ducks,' said Clarrie Copland, halting at No. 29. 'I don't like leaving Auntie too long.'

She went up the steps and put her basket down on the door step, so clumsily that the oranges piled in it bounced out down the steps into the road.

It was just as Tom was politely handing Clarrie the oranges that he heard a faint scream and a series of heavy thuds inside the house. Clarrie gave a yell.

'Quick, Clarrie, find your key! That must be your auntie a-falling downstairs,' cried Mrs. Lane. 'Poor old thing, she must a' tumbled right down the lot. I always said them stairs is a death trap. 'Ere you!' she yelled to Tom Brandon, 'there's an accident, you'd better see to it, she'll be badly 'urt.'

Clarrie, her wits all gone haywire in her agitation, turned her bag upside down to find her latch key, yelling: 'Auntie, we're coming. Are you hurt, Auntie? Drat the thing. I've got the fair jitters.'

It was Tom Brandon who picked up the latch key and opened the front door. A steep narrow flight of stairs ran almost straight up from the door; in the space at the bottom was huddled an old lady, her neck twisted, her limbs contorted. Brandon knew at once that she was dead, and that she had died less than a minute ago, for her hands and face were still warm.

Clarrie flopped on her knees beside the body, crying: 'Auntie darling, do speak to me, ducks . . . oh why did she ever come downstairs when I was out? I told her not to.'



'They're all the same all the old folks. Plain obstinate,' said Mrs. Lane. 'She do look bad, Clarrie. Got any brandy? Can we get her upstairs?'

'Better not move her until the doctor comes,' said Brandon. 'I'll whistle for my mate, he's not far away.'

Standing at the front door, he blew his whistle and when another constable came running up, Brandon said tersely, 'Surgeon and ambulance. Ring C.O.'

Mrs. Lane let out a sudden yell. 'Who's that upstairs? Gawd? There's someone up there, a thief most likely. Pushed her down. Here, you—'

But Brandon needed no urging. He wanted to go up those stairs to see if there were a concealed booby trap, a string tied across, a faulty stair, a slit in the linoleum.

But there was no string, no faulty stair, and the linoleum was intact, almost new.

He went into the room whence the sound came out—it was obviously the cat which had made the noise, jumping at the door handle, as cats do. It was evidently the old lady's bedroom, and Brandon had a quick look round. She seemed to have been writing a letter, for a writing block lay on the bed.

As he picked it up, Brandon saw some scribbles on the blotting paper. At some time she had been trying to get a word spelled right ‘Sertain.’ ‘Certin’: and then a sentence ‘Be *certain* you ring twice.’

Putting the block in his tunic pocket, Brandon quickly inspected the upstairs windows—all fastened and secure. ‘Ring twice’ he thought. He was remembering how Clarrie Copland had leant against the door post when the wind blew her hat, and she had leaned against the bell push.

The surgeon and the ambulance had come and gone. Clarrie Copland, weeping noisily, had gone with the body to the mortuary. Chief Inspector Macdonald had arrived from Scotland Yard. He said: ‘Well, constable?’

Tom Brandon gave his evidence tersely, every bit of it from the Jolly Sailor onwards, but he ended up. ‘I don’t see how we can get her, sir. She was outside. She only rang the bell.’

‘If you suspect a booby trap, constable, it’s up to you to look for it,’ replied Macdonald. ‘You say she fumbled about on the doorstep, by those railings. Let’s have a look. Yes, there’s a small hook here, and a good half-inch clearance under the front door.

‘Pick that mat up . . . I thought so. A neat little hole in the floor boards. They could have run a cord under the boards, with a spring inserted in it so that it would recoil when unhooked—an expanding curtain wire would do that.

‘Is there a cupboard under the stairs? Screwed up? It would be. You’ll have to take the linoleum up.’

It was the third step from the top which showed peculiarities. It was quite steady, but the riser had been sawn through across top, bottom and sides: so was the tread of the stair. Macdonald gave the riser a sharp blow: it fell flat on concealed hinges, and the tread of the stair, also hinged, fell in.

‘The stiff linoleum probably kept its shape and the old lady noticed nothing until her foot slipped,’ said Macdonald. ‘Now go and unscrew the door of the cupboard under the stairs, and you’ll see how they worked it. As you know, Joe Copland’s a clever craftsman.’

Tom got the door unscrewed and they went into the cupboard with a torch. Two cords were fastened to the hinged riser, one cord was white and the other green. When Tom pulled the white cord the riser fell flat and the stair tread above it collapsed.

The green cord was run through an eyelet hole screwed into the solid stair immediately above: when Tom pulled the green cord the riser went back into place, lifting the tread into the horizontal again.

‘Neat and simple,’ said Macdonald. ‘The principle is the same as two cords fixed to open or close a window or sloping fanlight. The cords were led under the boards and came up by the front door and were hitched to that hook.’

Tom gaped. ‘The window in that pub,’ he gasped. ‘Was that what made him think of it?’

‘Would this be relevant, sir?’ asked Macdonald’s CID sergeant.

‘This’ was a letter, still in its addressed envelope, though it had not been posted. ‘Dear Aggie. I think you’d better come. I’m worried, but I don’t like to write about it. Come between nine and ten Thursday morning. She’s out shopping, then. And be certain to ring *twice*. I don’t answer the door as a rule, being bad on my legs, but if you ring twice I shall know it’s you and come down. With love from Alice. P.S.—Remember, ring *twice*.’

‘And Alice gave it to Clarrie to post,’ said Macdonald, ‘and Clarrie opened it and read it, and made arrangements accordingly. Well, I think she deserves what she gets. Hullo, what’s

that? A double ring? Is this Joe Copland come home to dinner, doing a victory peal?’

Brandon opened the front door and saw Joe’s face when the latter saw the rolled back linoleum, the open cupboard door and the collapsed stair. Joe said nothing. There was nothing to say.

[The end of *Remember to Ring Twice* by Edith Caroline Rivett (as E. C. R. Lorac)]