

The Final Reel

by

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Monday:

‘What’ve you got for me, Bob?’

McLean ducked under the police tape and entered the dingy apartment. A dying fly battered itself against a grimy window, and there was a damp smell about the place, old mould and unemptied garbage. Something worse. He followed his nose into the smallest room. It wasn’t much wider than the ancient cludgie it held, but three men had managed to squeeze in there. DS Grumpy Bob Laird, a SOC photographer and the deceased.

‘I’d say he died a few days ago. Massive trauma to the head,’ Bob said. McLean peered closer, wished he hadn’t.

‘Pulled the chain and the whole cistern came off the wall,’ Bob continued. ‘It had to weigh a good hundred pounds.’

‘A tragic accident then.’ McLean stepped back to let Bob out of the room. The photographer’s flash popped a couple more times and then he too backed out.

Cleared, McLean could see the whole scene now. The cistern was still attached to the pan by its thick lead pipe. The brackets had come out of the wall and the whole thing had tipped forward, smashed into the victim’s head. Death would have been instant.

‘RIP Shuggy Brown,’ McLean said.

‘You know him?’

‘Small time cat burglar. Used to go through the death notices in the papers and do over the empty houses.’

‘Oh, aye, the Obituary Man. I remember,’ Bob said.

McLean looked at the dead figure in front of him, the cistern flopped to one side, its brackets still fixed to it. The bare wooden floorboards were dark with damp, but not soaked.

‘Who turned the water off?’ He stepped forwards into the room, stared up at the pipe. It had sheared off neatly where it would have entered the cistern.

‘No one, as far as I know,’ Bob said. ‘Neighbours complained of a smell. We forced entry. Called in as soon as we found him.’

‘Hmm.’ McLean leant over the recumbent corpse, trying hard not to breathe. There were four small holes in the wall above his head, where the cistern had been attached. A century of thick paint had left two bracket-shaped marks. Looking down, he saw the old brass screws lying behind the pan, two to each side. Their heads were also glossed with a thick coat of paint. Slots a distant memory.

‘Maybe not an accident then.’

Tuesday:

“The actress Shauna Zapata, who died last month at the age of a hundred and two, was cremated today in a private ceremony at Mortenhall Crematorium. Shauna, best known for her Hollywood career in the inter-war period, returned to her home town of

Edinburgh in the mid sixties. A recluse, it's understood that she spent her latter years, and the fortunes of her late three husbands, on tracking down all original prints of her roles. Film historians had hoped that she would bequeath this invaluable archive to the nation, but it was revealed today that her entire body of work was cremated with her."

McLean flicked off the radio and peered through the rain-smeared windscreen at the line of traffic snaking along Clerk Street. Edinburgh was its usual grey, a vicious wind throwing the moisture around the square-cut buildings like a child in a tantrum. Cocooned from it by his metal box, and with the heater working for a change, he was happy just to crawl along. Dan McFeely wasn't going anywhere in a hurry.

The apartment was in Newington, respectable enough without being too ostentatious. A uniform let him in the front door and he climbed four flights of stone stairs worn smooth by countless passing feet. Gloss green walls peeled with damp, stained by a hundred years of salts leaching from the sandstone. On the top landing, a rusty old bicycle frame was padlocked to the railings, its wheels and saddle long gone. Everything smelled faintly of cat piss.

'He's this way, sir. In the bath.' Another uniform showed McLean into the apartment. Inside it was a different world, neat and tidy, ordered. Expensive works of art hung on the walls and everywhere there were shelves of pottery figurines, silver figures, collectibles.

The bathroom was small, with a skylight high in the roof. Dan McFeely lay in a pool of scummy red water, one arm dangling over the tub, the other resting on his pale

white hairy chest. He head tilted back as if he were staring at the sky through the little square porthole. A neat gash ran under his pointy chin from one ear to the other.

‘He’s been here awhile,’ the uniform said.

‘Let me guess, the neighbours complained about the smell?’ McLean could almost taste the tang of iron in the air.

‘No sir,’ the uniform said. ‘I was going house to house, asking about the schoolyard muggings. I knocked and the door swung open.’

‘And you came looking for him in the bathroom?’

‘That door was open too, sir. I think he might have left them like that on purpose. To be found.’

‘What d’you mean?’ McLean asked. Then he noticed it, red and shiny in the blood-stained hand. A cut-throat razor.

‘Shite.’

‘Sir?’

‘This is Dan McFeely, sergeant,’ McLean said. ‘Feely the Fence. See all that stuff out there? That’s stolen goods, only he knows we’ve no way of proving it. The dodgy stuff he’s always kept hidden, but he’s a cocky bastard who likes to show off how much cleverer he is than us. If he committed suicide, then I’m in line to be the next Pope.’

‘Death would appear to have been caused by heart failure due to acute loss of blood.’

McLean stood silently, watching as the pathologist poked and prodded the white body on the slab.

‘Loss of blood would appear to be a result of the severing of the carotid artery with a sharp blade. A cut-throat razor such as that found in the subject’s left hand. However, appearances would be deceiving in this matter. Whilst a great deal of blood has been lost, there is more still in the body than would be consistent with such a death.’

‘What?’ McLean asked.

‘I’m saying,’ the pathologist fixed him with a withering glare. ‘That he didn’t die from this wound. He was good as dead already when it was inflicted on him. What’s more, the cut goes from left to right, and the blade was found in his left hand.’

‘What did kill him then?’

‘I can’t be sure, but he’s got some interesting bruising on his neck around the incisions. I’ll have to do some tests to be sure, but he could’ve been strangled first.’

Wednesday:

Half past four and it was already dark. Sometimes McLean hated Edinburgh and mostly that was during the winter months. Dark when you got up, dark long before the working day was over. If his working day could ever be said to be over.

The house stood back from the road, screened from the traffic by a high wall and mature trees. It was a substantial building; three storeys of blackened sandstone and tall windows. Grumpy Bob met him at the door and they stepped inside.

‘Gabriel Squire,’ Bob said.

‘The art collector, I know. What’s the story?’

‘His housekeeper found him.’ Bob pointed to a slight woman, sitting on the other side of an entrance hall.

‘Mrs Davey, this is Detective Inspector McLean,’ Bob said as the housekeeper looked up. Her eyes were red with crying, her cheeks drained of colour. ‘Could you tell him what you told me.’

‘I was just cleaning the house, like I do every Thursday,’ the woman said. ‘Mr Squire was in his study. I don’t go in there. But I heard voices, you see. Mr Squire shouting at someone. I... I... was listening at the door. I know I shouldn’t, but Mr Squire, he’s ever so nice a gentleman. I couldn’t bear it if he was... Well then I heard a woman scream “It’s mine, give it to me.” And then there was this terrible crash.’ Mrs Davey stopped, the tears welling in her eyes.

‘Perhaps I’d better have a look,’ McLean said to Bob.

A huge fireplace dominated one end of the study and a large desk sat under the window, strewn with odd items. Most of the walls were lined with bookcases and cabinets filled with curios. A body lay sprawled across the hearth.

Gabriel Squire had been in his late fifties, fit, with a full head of greying hair. He wore a velvet smoking jacket, a silk cravat around his neck. Rather incongruously, McLean thought, he sported a pair of fading tartan bathies on his feet. And a large bloody mess where his left temple ought to have been.

‘Looks like he tripped over the rug. Hit his head on the fireplace,’ Bob pointed to a skin-and-hair bloodstain on the carved stone.

‘What a way to go,’ McLean said. ‘Killed by an Adam. But what about this woman?’

‘Don’t know about that sir,’ Bob said. ‘Mrs Davey... Well, I don’t think she’s playing the full team, if you know what I mean. She says she knocked, and when she didn’t get an answer, she came in. Found him dead. Called us straight away.’

McLean crossed over the room to the window. It was latched, a thick layer of paint gumming up the works. He doubted it had been opened in years. There was only the one door. His eyes fell on the desk and it’s collection of curios; jewellery mostly, small stuff but expensive. McLean was no great expert, but he knew diamonds when he saw them. And craftsmanship. An intricately carved silver figurine instantly put him in mind of Dan McFeely’s apartment. And in the midst of it all sat a small round tin, perhaps ten inches across and an inch deep. There was something about it that was almost mesmerizing. Perhaps because it looked so out of place. Only years of instinct stopped him from picking it up. Instead, he went back into the hall where Mrs Davey was being comforted by a WPC.

‘Has Mr Squire had any unusual visitors recently? Say in the last week?’ He asked.

The housekeeper made a strange face, as if thinking about things didn’t come naturally to her. She started to shake her head, then stopped.

‘There was a gentleman. Last Thursday it would have been. He didn’t stay long.’

‘Wait here a moment.’ McLean went back to his car. On the back seat the Dan McFeely case file sat amidst a mound of other paperwork and detritus. He fished a picture out of it. Mortuary shot of just the head.

‘Was that him?’ He asked Mrs Davey. She looked at it nervously.

‘Yes, I think so. Only he doesn’t look at all well there. He wasn’t nearly so pale.’

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‘You’d think he died from the blow to the temple,’ the pathologist said. ‘But in actual fact he was dead before he hit the fireplace. I understand it was an Adam?’

‘Stolen from Auchencruive,’ McLean said. ‘It turns out that Mr Squire was quite the collector of other people’s antiques. So what killed him then, heart attack?’

‘No. He was throttled. Quite violently. His windpipe’s been crushed and there’s severe bruising to his neck. The odd thing is that his cravat was still perfectly tied.’

Thursday:

‘This piece is exquisite. Eighteenth century. Made by the ourselves, of course.’

McLean sat in a small office at the back of Douglas and Foote, jewellers to Her Majesty the Queen. Across a tiny desk, an elderly man was peering through an eyeglass at one of the silver figurines found at Gabriel Squire’s house.

‘Do you know who it was sold to?’

‘It was part of a set of nine, commissioned by the seventh Marquis of Queensberry. See, it has a number on the base? That was your stick number for the day’s shooting. It came back to us in the seventies, part of an auction to raise funds to pay death duties. My predecessor, Mr Mayfield, liked to buy back our more exceptional work whenever he could.’

‘So it was stolen from you?’ McLean asked.

‘Stolen? Heavens no,’ the old man said. ‘We sold this piece to Mrs McLeod not more than a year ago.’

‘Mrs McLeod?’

‘You’d probably know her better by her stage name, Shauna Zapata. Such a shame she died. She was one of our best customers. Had a good eye. No, this piece belongs to her estate.’

Friday:

It took McLean only five minutes to decide he didn’t like Kiernan McTavish. The solicitor was executor for the will of the late Shauna McLeod. He was also shifty, never letting his eyes settle anywhere. He fidgeted constantly. And he was evasive.

‘Mrs McLeod’s worldly goods have all been accounted for,’ he said, barely looking at the small silver figurine. ‘They’re to be auctioned at Sotheby’s at the end of the month. All proceeds will go to the Children’s Hospital.’

‘So you’re sure there was no burglary. Nothing’s gone missing. None of these items.’ He laid out a number of pictures on the desk. McTavish pounced on them like a clumsy cat. Anything was better than having to look McLean in the eye. He watched as the lawyer peered at each photo, hoping for a spark of recognition. Nothing.

‘Or this?’ He asked, finally, placing a photograph of the circular tin in front of the lawyer. ‘It’s a roll of eight mil film. But it’s so old and rotten no-one can tell what’s on it.’

‘Nope,’ McTavish said, just a little too quickly. Something like fear flitted across his face and all of a sudden he stopped fidgeting, look straight at McLean. ‘Do you know anything about Mrs McLeod?’ He asked.

‘Only what I read in the papers. And I’ve seen a couple of her movies on the telly.’

‘Shauna McLeod was a troubled woman,’ McTavish said, his voice suddenly formal, as if he were summing up before the jury. ‘After her third husband died, she began to believe she was cursed. She thought that every film she’d made had taken a little piece of her soul. So she set about trying to get them back. She tracked down and bought every original printing of every movie she ever appeared in. Every screen test. Every gag reel. Even the cuttings that had found their way into the hands of collectors. She found them all, and she bought them all.’

‘And then she had them all cremated alongside her. I heard it on the radio. They had to close Mortonhall down for the day.’ McLean said.

‘Quite, Inspector,’ McTavish said. ‘And she was a meticulous woman. Everything was catalogued. Everything. It was stipulated in her will that if her wishes were not carried out, then I... That is to say, we would not receive our fee. It was a not inconsiderable sum, which is why, Inspector, I am perfectly certain that none of these items belonged to Mrs McLeod at the time of her death.’

McLean took back the photographs.

‘Well, thank you for your time, Mr McTavish,’ he said.

‘I’m glad I could be of help. Tell me, Inspector. What happens to those?’

‘These? Technically they belong to the estate of Gabriel Squire, but since they were among other items identified as stolen they’ll be treated as the same.’

‘And?’ McTavish was fidgeting again.

‘We’ll hang onto them for a couple of months and if no-one’s claimed them they’ll be put up for auction.’

‘I see. Well. Thankyou Inspector. Goodbye.’

A couple of months later:

It was an expensive car; a nineteen-sixties Bristol still as shiny and polished as the day it rolled out of the factory. McLean looked through the windscreen at the body of Kiernan McTavish. His face had turned blue.

‘Not something you see much of these days,’ said Grumpy Bob. ‘It doesn’t work with modern cars. You just get a nasty headache.’

‘Quite,’ McLean looked up at the house and then back to the car. How long was it since he had spoken to McTavish? He knelt down by the open door, reached in and turned the key. It was dead, no juice in the battery. But it was in the ‘on’ position. He looked at McTavish. The lawyer was relaxed, as if he had fallen asleep, but there was a livid bruise around his neck.

‘How’d we find out about him?’

‘Neighbour called. Said the car had been left running all night. Uniform came round to have a quiet chat about being more considerate.’

McLean looked around the interior of the car, all leather and polished walnut, shiny chrome and bakelite switches. A piece of paper was scrunpled into a ball in the footwell by the pedals. He unravelled it. An auction receipt for five hundred pounds, paid for lot 786, plus fifteen percent commission. Cash sale. Dated yesterday.

‘Anyone had a look in the house?’ McLean asked.

‘Not yet, why?’

‘Because this man was murdered, then put in here to make it look like suicide.

Sound like a familiar MO to you?’

‘Gabriel Squire?’ Bob asked.

‘And Dan McFeely, and I’m thinking Shuggy Brown too. The burglar, the fence, the client and the lawyer. But who? And why? Get a SOC team down here Bob. I’m going to have a quick nosey inside.’

Outside, the house was classic Edinburgh West End Georgian. Inside it had been stripped down to a white painted minimalist shell. The floors were dark polished wood, the doors the same. The hallway held nothing but a tall metal hatstand. McLean slipped on a pair of latex gloves, then pushed open the nearest door.

It lead into the sitting room, which looked out onto the driveway in front through a tall bay window. There were no curtains, just the flimsiest of white canvas blinds, rolled up to the ceiling. A living gas flame fire flickered in a brutal square stone fireplace beneath a wall-mounted plasma television as big as a cinema screen. A white leather sofa faced both. The only other furniture in the room was a desk made from a sheet of glass suspended between two metal trestles. Lying on top of this was lot 786. The tin.

McLean prised the lid off with his thumb, eyes watering at the smell of decomposing celluloid. There wasn't much left of the film, just a vaguely spiral gooey black mess. He touched it lightly with one finger and it slid towards the edge of the tin, revealing a corner of stained paper label underneath. Flipping the tin over delicately, he tried to get the sticky goo to drop into the lid. It oozed out in great strings, then suddenly dropped with a noise like a dying trifle. He held the tin up to the light, peering at the indistinct words on the darkened paper.

Shauna and Morag. Summer 1919. Balnakiel.

'It's mine! Give it to me now!'

McLean tried to whirl around, but all he could feel was hands at his throat. Powerful fingers cut off his breathing in an instant, choked him so that he couldn't even shout for help. Instinctively he dropped the tin and reached up for his attacker. His vision was already narrowing, stars popping in his eyes.

'Mine I tell you! Mine!' A woman's voice, mid-Atlantic accent, familiar. His hands were at his throat now, but he couldn't find her hands, even though he could feel them squeezing the life out of him. Then he saw her, reflected in the glass tabletop.

Long blonde hair tumbling over her shoulders, she looked like some dame from a detective movie. She was dressed for the part, too. Thirties chic, all the rage once again, and she had her hands around his throat. She was choking the life out of him. He'd seen her before. In black and white.

But she wasn't there. She couldn't be there.

McLean reached out blindly for the lid of the tin. The remnants of celluloid lay inside it, oozing out into a sticky black puddle. He could feel his strength fading as his fingers grasped at the edge.

And then he had it. With a last effort, he flung it as hard as he could in the direction of the fireplace.

‘The attacker must’ve left the gas fire on without lighting it. Reckoned it’d go bang and cover up any evidence.’ McLean stared up at the smiling face of Grumpy Bob from his hospital bed. The sergeant had brought a big bag of grapes and was slowly eating his way through the lot of them. ‘The SOC boys were well pissed that you torched their crime scene,’ he added. ‘And the chief wants to know what you were doing in there in the first place. But it could be worse.’

‘How so?’ McLean asked, then wished he hadn’t. His throat hurt even when he thought about swallowing and his face felt like he’d been asleep in the sun for a week. No one had let him near a mirror so he had no idea how much hair he still had left.

‘Well,’ Grumpy Bob said, popping the last grape into his mouth, scrumpling up the bag and throwing it in the vicinity of the bin. ‘You could be dead.’

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