

Maria Mezzatesta

IN THE GRIP
OF THE CRIME

Mystery at Harwich



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Foreword by Salvatore Tomasello

A distinguished lady, a quiet little town, the mist of the English countryside, a corpse, and of course, a killer. The classic ingredients of a thriller are all present. But *In the grip of crime* is not the usual thriller. Superintendent Baxter will have to face a complex and challenging investigation to unravel an apparently unexplainable and mysterious murder. This thriller captures the reader from the beginning right to the end, so much so that one finds oneself reading it all in one go, without interruptions.

The writing is fluent and the characters are well defined, like in a fresco whose landscapes are presented as in a dynamic and expressive photographic sequence. *In the grip of crime* is a testament to the remarkable skills of its writer, Maria Mezzatesta, mostly known as an author of poems and short stories. This makes the book not only a thriller, but a true story of great depth.

1) The villa of the swamp

One afternoon in late October, Carol Tompkins was travelling on the high road heading to Harwich, a quiet little town in Essex. She was coming from London, where she had purchased some items for her antique shop. She was proceeding along the A120 on board of a rather old red Austin, observing the landscape around her. The autumnal grey sky had been thickening with dark clouds looming ahead, foreshadowing the impending rain. On the sides of the road the hedges had already turned yellow, the semi-submerged fields looked gloomy and desolate. A thin mist blurred the contour of the countryside in the distance, and the first evening shadows made the landscape even hazier. She had passed Chemford, when all of a sudden the car started jolting. Worried, she pressed hard on the accelerator, but the car just jolted to a halt. She tried turning the ignition key time and again, but nothing happened. She got off the car, she lifted the bonnet and took a look at the engine, but all seemed fine. She shut the bonnet and waited for the help of some driver to come along. She waited in vain for more than half an hour. The road was deserted, she could not see a single inhabited building around. Meanwhile, it had become dark, and the few passing cars had been speeding by without stopping. Overwhelmed by a certain fear, she decided to abandon the car and continued to walk up to Dovercourt, about a mile away, to make a call. She proceeded

through the fields on the right hand-side of the road, thinking that she could arrive quicker. As she walked, the rain had begun to fall. The soil around her, which was already soft and slimy from the downpours of the previous day, had become muddy. She walked on with a fixed glaze, wincing at every rustle, trying to catch the sight of someone in the darkness. She walked for a good quarter of an hour, but there was not a soul about. Just when she thought she was lost, a light shone in the distance. It had to be coming from a house, a farm, or maybe a hotel, however she soon ruled that option out, considering the place not very suitable for that type of construction.

As she got closer, she realised that the light was coming from a massive villa with lighted windows. The building inspired a certain awe. She could not see any other shelter around; she was wet, so she decided to ring the brass bell on the wall, close to an iron gate. Nobody answered for a few minutes. The silence of the countryside was suddenly broken by a barking dog, then a voice with a foreign accent asked who it was. She briefly explained what had happened to her, and after a few moments she heard the lock snapping. The nearby gate opened up, and she stepped into a gravelled avenue. At about twenty metres ahead of her she noticed, on the main entrance, illuminated by the light of a post, a tall, young black man; a dog was coming towards her barking.

“What a weather!” the man muttered while rushing in her aid under an umbrella. “Come in, hurry!”

He approached her, offering her shelter under the umbrella

until they reached the hall of the villa. He closed the umbrella, then waved for her to go up the wide staircase. "Please, please, come up", he said to her while putting the umbrella away.

Carol kept a bit standoffish. "I don't mean to disturb", she said, "I would only like to make a call to inform about what happened to me." The man with an unmistakable foreign accent replied: "The phone is upstairs, come in, don't be afraid! I will take you to the Countess, and you will be able to dry your soaked clothes." Unwillingly, Carol followed him. They went up the stairs, then they kept walking down a long corridor leading to different rooms. A chorus of strident voices came from one of the rooms. When they met her, Carol noticed some people who animatedly discussed around a table, while they were examining some documents. At least that was what it seemed to her. The man led her to the last room, a spacious lounge. He pointed her towards a damask sky-blue sofa, then he vanished discreetly.

She remained on her own to observe the warm and cosy environment.

The walls were covered in pink-flowered wallpaper, albeit dated and yellowed in several places.

The room was filled with furniture - sofas of different shapes and sizes, pillows, small wooden tables replete with objects, big Chinese vases, all placed a bit at random, without an order, and with little taste such as to almost convey a sense of confusion.

A wide walnut bookcase occupied an entire wall. Oriental figurines of jade and ivory, of good make, reposed on various shelves, alongside books, whereas the floor was covered in Persian carpets.

In a corner, a fire was merrily blazing in the pink marble fireplace.

Instinctively, Carol headed there to warm up. To her left-hand side, a large wood-framed window looking out on the park below.

The rain continued to pelt-down and was now more of a driving blizzard; the window panes were quivering in the frames and the wind was howling like a tormented soul.

Carol shrugged her shoulders, and for a moment she rejoiced that she had shelter. She was soon joined by a young and good looking woman.

She was tall, with delicate oriental features. Her slim, slender body was wrapped in a sky-blue dress which highlighted her olive complexion and black velvety almond-shaped eyes. It was difficult to tell where she came from. "I am Yuril Barnes," the woman introduced herself, extending her long and delicate hand.

"Gilbert," she continued, "our butler told me about your unpleasant adventure and that you wish to make a call. The phone is on the small table at the end."

"Thank you, you are very kind. My name is Carol Tompkins and I am sorry to have disturbed you, but I absolutely did not know what to do. I'm on my way to Harwich from

London, and my car broke down.

I've made this journey countless times without a hitch. It is a rather old car, but it has never given me big problems. I really believe it is about time I changed it!

The other smiled and replied, "You will probably have to change it! In any case, you are not disturbing me. I see that you are wet, would you like to borrow some dry clothes?" Carol lifted her hand to reject the offer: "No, no, thank you. I am afraid I have given you enough trouble already. Maybe I'd like to dry myself off."

"Come with me, the bathroom is in the adjacent room," said the countess. They went out into the corridor together. Angry voices proceeded from the room nearby; she could grab a few words like "agency", "inheritance".

A resonant male voice boomed: "he is unwell, he is really unwell." The countess shrugged her shoulders murmuring: "There are guests tonight." Embarrassed, Carol replied, "I am really sorry for the inconvenience I have caused you."

Her host nonchalantly gave away her misgivings and instructed Gilbert to change the towels. Carol washed her face and her hands, and dried the clothes she was wearing with a hairdryer; then she went back to the lounge and prepared to make a call.

The phone was in the room opposite the entrance, next to a wooden display cabinet - most probably 18th century - she thought, given her knowledge of antiques. It also contained a unique collection of daggers and stilettos of various origins and

periods.

There were Russian knives, others Indian, many were ancient and Oriental, perhaps Chinese or Japanese. Some were adorned with precious stones; they must have been worth a fortune.

She was about to dial the number of her friend Maggie, when a tall and distinguished man entered the room, a typical specimen of an English gentleman, with a frank face and vivid light eyes.

“What a hitch!” said the man, giving her a start. Then he stared at her for long. “Tompkins, Carol Tompkins!” he exclaimed. “Don’t you remember me? We met a couple of weeks ago at Judge King’s.”

Carol stared at him perplexed. Then, she recognised him: “Tedder, Lawyer Tedder.” The man walked towards her, and gave her his hand. Carol sneezed.

“Your clothes are damp, you will get sick. There is nothing better than a glass of whisky to warm up.” He poured the liquor in a glass. “Dry yourself better, and ask the countess to lend you some dry clothes, and then I will take you home.”

Carol protested a little, but deep down she was happy about the offer. She went to the bathroom again, and changed her clothes.

Half an hour later she was unrecognisable, while she was sitting on the sofa near the fire, in dry clothes, sipping a sherry.

They seemed like three old friends, who had gathered to pleasantly spend an autumn evening together, while outside it was raining. In fact, the conversation was drifting. The countess

had a strange preoccupied expression and she jerked at every rustle. Because of the wind, one could hear disparate noises. Some door was creaking, thuds of falling objects, violent rustle of the trees' branches. "Where did you leave the car?" the countess enquired. "On the high road A120, about one mile from here," answered Carol.

"I am afraid that with this rainstorm you will not find anybody to repair it. Today is Saturday evening and tomorrow being Sunday it will not be easy to find a mechanic. You could turn to the Emergency Services," said the countess.

"It is not so important. I have another car at home, my husband's. I will come back tomorrow morning to take it back. I will tow it to my house with Alfred's car, and on Monday I will call my usual mechanic."

"I can help you to tow it," offered Lawyer Tedder. Carol shook her head, "It is absolutely out of discussion. Outside there is a proper storm and it will last for long. It is not worth doing that, also because, as I was saying to the countess, it is a rather old and superannuated car. I will think about it tomorrow."

"As you want," answered the lawyer, and coughed slightly.

After a brief silence, he asked: "Your husband, Alfred I believe, isn't here?" "No, he is away for work. He is a photographer and he often travels," answered Carol. Meanwhile, the butler Gilbert turned up in the lounge with a

tall, thin, and good-looking young man. His blonde hair was wet because of the rain, and his bleary big blue eyes looked tired and upset. The young man jerked nervously, as if something worried him.

His long and gaunt hands were shaking with agitation, while once close to the fireplace, he had lifted and opened it to warm up.

“Something isn’t right?” asked the countess.

“I feel cold. I have just come back and I got wet,” answered the young man while rubbing his hands. “I see that your guests have arrived,” continued the young man while looking at Carol. The countess explained who Carol was, and what had happened to her, and introduced the man as Jonah Barnes, her stepson.

“Where have you been?” asked the countess. “I went out to check the horses in the stable. With this storm they have become frisky. Are the others here yet?”

“The others, who?” asked the perplexed countess. The young man did not answer, addressing his astonished look at the flame, which was darting in the fireplace. Meanwhile, the butler Gilbert was listening and walking in suspense. He was first looking at the countess, then at her stepson with an inquisitive expression. Eventually, he decided to ask: “Should I ask for dinner to be prepared?”

“No, not for me at least. I am not hungry,” answered the stepson, “and besides you already have someone giving you

company,â## he continued sharply, directing his eloquent glance towards the lawyer.

â##Do as you like!â## retorted the countess sighing. â##Lawyer Tedder is here for work. He will have dinner here as he has always done on such occasions. If you do not agree, you could even say itâ##.

â##No, it does not matter. Itâ##s thatâ#!â## he did not complete the phrase, â##he is always here, in our way,â## he concluded dryly.

Tedder stood up from the sofa and was about to answer back, but the countess stopped him with a wave of her hand.

â##I, I believe that you are not feeling well tonight, Jonah,â## said the woman softening and placing a hand on her stepsonâ##s shoulders.

â##The lawyer is leaving; he will take Mrs. Tompkins home.â## The woman rose and led the way out of the room with the young man, who followed her docilely like a child.

Gilbert went close to Carol, and said, â##I see that you dried yourself. Did you make the call?â##

â##No, I eventually did not make the call, since Lawyer Tedder offered to accompany me home. However, you have been very kind and I wanted to thank you.â##

â##For so little! I am happy that everything has been sorted out. It has been a lively night and I have fallen behind in my duties, I have lots of things to finish, like the dinner for example.â##

Carol smiled, and extended her hand to him saying, "It is difficult to find helpful and kind people in today's world. Thank you again."

Gilbert smiled at her showing off his very white teeth, which stood out on his dark face.

"As they both clarify," intervened Tedder, "I'll take Mrs. Tompkins home. I think that after the unpleasant adventure she ardently desires to go home." Carol nodded while the lawyer was going to get ready.

"Come, I will accompany you," Gilbert said with deference. Both led the way through the corridor.

From the room nearby, where one could still hear some voices, but more muffled, the countess came out by the doorstep, waiting to say goodbye to her.

"Jonah is a good boy, he is just instinctive and at this point Lawyer Tedder should know him," she said to Carol and excused herself for her stepson's behaviour.

"Can I do anything else for you, Mrs. Tompkins?" The antique dealer had a scornful smile and stretched out her hand. "It was nice meeting you, countess."

The big, almond-shaped black eyes of the other sparkled, and Carol could not help but think that she was an undoubtedly beautiful and charming woman. "Me too," she said simply.

She set off, followed by Gilbert. They went through the corridor, and descended the stairs, where the lawyer was waiting for her in an overcoat that he had meanwhile donned. While she

was walking down the last step, they could hear a dull thud, like that of a heavy body disastrously falling on the floor. "What was that?" cried the countess, who had appeared on top of the stairs. "I do not know, perhaps the wind made something tumble down!" exclaimed Gilbert.

"Yes, may be. Take a look around though." Even the lawyer started because of the strange noise. They went to the park while it was still raining, and the thunderbolts were brightening the trees around, followed by a rumble of thunder.

"What weather!" grumbled Carol, while shrugging her shoulders, cheering herself up to have found somebody who could take her back home.

2) Finding of the corpse

When Carol woke up, it was late. The clock on the bedside table marked a quarter to ten. It was Sunday, so she did not have to open the store. She could have lain around for longer, but she remembered that she had left the car on the main road, hence she got up, lazily prepared a warm bath, and had an abundant breakfast of toast, bacon, and coffee. She came down to the garage at a quarter past eleven. She took a strong rope to tow the car, and slowly drove off. The mechanics were closed, therefore, she was thinking of towing the car with a rope and getting it repaired the following Monday. The road was almost deserted, it was not raining anymore, but the sky was still grey and dark, and for sure another downpour was looming ahead.

She went through George Street and at the end of the road she took the A120 to Colchester and London, travelling on the same road backwards. After about half-an-hour of driving she found the car where she had left it the day before. Luckily, she managed to pull it over close to the guardrail. She quickly steered and parked the car in front of it. She got off the car with the rope to tie it, and looked inside to make sure that everything was fine.

As she stooped down, she was horrified. On the rear seat a woman with a slit throat lay motionless on her back, curled up.

To shake off the horror which had immobilised her, Carol stepped backwards, banging her back on the trunk of a tree

bordering the road.

She let out a sharp scream. Then she tried to pluck up courage and re-examined the inside of the car attentively. The woman seemed to be young, about twenty-five to thirty years old.

She had big, green, wide-open, and gaping eyes, and seemed to look in front of her in bewilderment. She was slightly folded on her right hip with bent knees, and positioned in such a way as not to be easily seen from the outside. Her face was completely unknown to Carol. She did not remember to have ever seen her before then.

She had a wide wound on her neck and red of the coagulated blood.

A thousand questions overwhelmed Carol. Who was she? How did she end up in her car? Didn't she put the safety catch on? She did not recall it well. The locks did not show any sign of break-in. Had anybody noticed the car having a breakdown, opened it, and killed her inside it? A thought-out crime in the world of ill repute? Perhaps a prostitute, who had withdrawn with a client, and ended up in tragedy? Or a premeditated murder, consummated in the neighbourhood and the corpse then transported to her car? Like a robot, she opened the car door, noticing that the safety catch was deactivated, and tilted over the rear seat.

A hand dangled inactive, touching her skirt. That contact made her shiver. She became scared and, incapable of dominating her nerves, she screamed like a mad woman. She

feared that somebody could hear her, she closed the car door, she alighted on Alfred's car again, and went back home. Once she arrived, she tried to recover and pluck up courage. She drank a sherry, and spent some time to think about what to do. She decided to call a dear friend, Timothy King, to get some advice.

The latter was a judge on pension, the most suitable person to steer her in the right direction. She called him, and explained what happened to her. The man, very upset by the story, could not refrain himself from calling the police of Harwich district to report the incident.

That same afternoon, Superintendent Baxter knocked on the door of Carol's house. The man entered the house by showing his police badge. He had a limpid and severe glance. He was a fat and stocky man, with a round and bristly face on account of the short beard that encircled it, and he had piercing, small green eyes.

He gave his fattish and humid hand to her. She showed him into the drawing room, to the floral-patterned sofa near the wide wind overlooking the sea, which that day had the dark colour of the leaden sky.

The sea was surging, like herself, she thought. They sat facing each other; the man coughed slightly and lit his briar pipe after having asked for permission. A cloud of smoke assailed her. The man spoke in a clear and cold voice:

I am Superintendent Adam Baxter. Judge King, who almost all of us in our milieu keep calling thus, despite him being

retired for about couple of years, instructed us to go on the main road to London, the A120, where about a mile from Dovercourt we found a red Austin with the registration number HM453. Inside the car was the corpse of a woman. Is the car yours?â##

â##Yes.â##

â##In the rear seat of your car a corpse of a woman was found. She was probably killed with a sharp knife or a similar weapon. The forensics doctor will provide me with a detailed report about the time and cause of her death.â##

The man cleared his throat and continued. â##We have identified the woman as Sally Barnes, daughter of the defunct Earl Barnes, whose villa is situated in the neighbourhood. She was wearing a pair of trousers, in whose pockets there were documents that allowed her identification.â##

â##Oh!â## muttered Carol hiding her face with her hands. The investigator looked at her with interest.

â##Did you know the victim? Did you have any relation with her?â## Carol removed her hands from her face. â##No,â## she said resolutely, â##but yesterday evening I was at their villa because of a strange coincidence of destiny.â##

The man blew a puff of smoke. His small green eyes flashed with interest. â##Please, tell meâ## he said, removing a small notebook from the pocket.

â##There is little to say.â##

â##First of all, please tell me your full details and your profession.â##

“My name is Carol Tompkins, and I have been living here in Harwich, I would say since always. I have been living in this house since I got married about twenty years ago, while before I used to live on the Main Street. I manage an antiques store on the King’s Head street with another partner. This, I am afraid, is it.”

“Why were you at the Barnes villa yesterday?”

“Yesterday early morning I went to London to purchase some objects for my store, and while I was coming back, my car, the Austin as I was just saying, broke down.

The street was almost deserted and not one driver assisted me. So, I got out of the car, and I carried on walking through the countryside heading towards Dovercourt. Meanwhile, it started to rain, it was almost dark, and in a state of confusion, I saw the villa and rang the bell. Here for the first time I met the countess and her stepson. Along with them there was Lawyer Tedder, an acquaintance Judge King and I have in common, who then took me back home. The weather worsened, so I left the car on the main road, and this morning I went to take it back. At that point I made the macabre discovery.”

“Therefore, you have never seen the victim before this morning?”

“Absolutely, I haven’t.”

“Er!” murmured the other, lighting his briar pipe which had meanwhile gone out.

“I need to drink something,” enjoined Carol, shaken. She

got up and extracted a bottle of sherry from the cocktail cabinet. She asked the inspector if he would like something to drink. To her great surprise, Baxter accepted the sherry, and remained to sip it slowly, while watching the sea.

From the large window one could see the grey and frothy sea, rippled by the whitening shine of the waves. "In winter it is sad here," said the superintendent, as if speaking to himself.

"Do you think so? It is not so for me or my husband Alfred. We love the sea a lot, especially in winter when there isn't much chaos in the city. We own a sailing boat. My husband is a member of the local Nautical Club."

The man nodded pensive. "Well, where were we? Ah, yes! At what time did you leave London precisely?"

"At about five o'clock in the evening"

"Did you carry out a check on the car before leaving?"

"Do you mean from London or from Harwich?"

"From Harwich."

"No, the car is rather old, but in the last few months it has not given me any particular problems. I rarely use the car. I generally go to work by walk. I take the car when it rains, or when I have to go out of town to London. It seemed fine to me, for as much as we women understand when it comes to engines, at least women of my age."

"How old are you?"

"Fifty-six years old"

"At what time did the breakdown happen?"

â##I would say about an hour later, around six oâ##clock in the evening more or less. I stayed in the car for a good quarter of an hour, trying to put it in motion, but with no success. I got off the car hoping to get help from some driver, but in vain. As I did not have any lights with me or anything else, and considering the main road not very safe, I thought to reach Dovercourt through the countryside. I walked until I saw the villa, and I rang the bell. Here everyone was very kind to me, I stayed at the villa for about an hour, and then Lawyer Tedder took me back home.â##

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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