

A FINAL RECKONING

‘When we come to the final reckoning, we had better have our papers in order,’ said the cleric as he walked out of the door into the snowfall of a Victorian Christmas card.

‘Amen to that,’ said the doctor, as he peered at the corpse on the table. In his right hand he clutched the letter from the bank which promised that the dead man would be able to pay for the post mortem. He could never feel it completely moral for a sick person to make himself a burden to others.

The professor of philosophy mused momentarily on the irony that due to a clerical error the bank had not approved the dead man’s credit rating in time to pay for a life-saving operation for him. The bank’s records system had broken down for a number of days: a phenomenon which had meant that a large number of people had died because they could not prove their credit worth to pay for essential medical services.

This problem of proving one’s own worth had led to a resurgence of the practices of the wise women in the villages of their country as doctors had become too expensive. People went to the wise women for potions, general advice and even surgery. It had also led to a concomitant increase in the country’s mortality rates amid the smell of cloves, rosemary and other such amateur cures.

As the philosopher had argued in his seminal article on causation, there was one simple force at work which connected the vast impersonality of the cosmos, the random failure of the bank’s record systems and this man’s untimely death. In short: stuff just happens.

The lawyer sat at the wooden table in the centre of the room and completed the post mortem documentation with the intense concentration of a small child, occasionally even slipping his tongue between his teeth when he came to the more difficult bits. The three men would complete their inventory of the dead man’s life and deduct their fees from the sale of any valuable chattels found in the home. As the lawyer looked about himself he did not hold out much hope of finding anything of any particular value.

And so the great triumvirate of death sat in the dead man’s parlour: the doctor, the philosopher and the lawyer. The man of the church had long since gone. The three remaining figures turned their attention to the inventory of the dead man’s life.

The doctor began the slow litany of possessions and dreams that filled the dead man’s home. ‘Passport ... in the name of Hans Cremer ... with a photograph that looks nothing like the man the mortician will have to deal with ... identity card, library card, a bus ticket, an old cinema ticket ... a small scrap of paper with a phone number on it. Perhaps a lover, or maybe just a friend. Why don’t you try to call it?’, he asked the philosopher, stretching out to him the small pill of crumpled paper.

In the meantime, the doctor continued to go through the effects. ‘There are a lot of old bills here: electricity, gas, water, local taxes, government taxes ... nothing out of the ordinary. No credit cards ... just some bank statements. He seems always to have had

a small overdraft – always spending slightly more than he earned. Oh ... this is interesting ... every once in a while he makes a large payment by cheque into the account to clear off the overdraft. In fact,’ he said, rummaging through a sheaf of bank statements, ‘he seems to pay that in once a year. Ah yes, it’s his birthday – the date is on his identity card. I wonder who sends him the cheque.’

‘Shouldn’t there be more documents?’ asked the lawyer. ‘There usually seem to be such a lot of documents.’

‘Maybe he kept all of his memories in his head, or maybe he had more feelings than possessions,’ suggested the doctor.

‘Feelings!?’ exclaimed the philosopher. ‘What earthly use are feelings? Documents are what you need, like the cleric just said. You need to write things down, get them notarised, make them official. “Feelings” indeed. The very idea.’

‘Oh ... I don’t know,’ mused the lawyer ‘... all that paper cluttering up the place.’

The philosopher had been dialling the number on the piece of paper and was now involved in a conversation which was proceeding in hushed tones. Indeed, less than a conversation it was a series of curt questions posed by the philosopher to which he appeared to receive slightly longer answers. ‘Who are you? ... I am preparing a dead man’s accounts ... Cremer ... Where am I calling? ... Really? ... (a pause) ... C-r-e-m-e-r ... How much? ... Really? ... For how long? ... What type of services? ... I see ... Thank you, goodbye.’

‘So?’ asked the doctor.

‘It was an escort service,’ answered the philosopher, ‘it seems Cremer went there regularly: once a week – and he owes them money from his last visit.’

‘Yes,’ said the doctor, ‘now you mention it, there is a cash withdrawal for exactly the same amount from his bank every Friday.’

‘So now the escort service will be able to sue him,’ moaned the lawyer, ‘leaving even less money.’

‘No,’ said the doctor, flicking at the bank statements, ‘a contract for immoral purposes is not legally enforceable. It should be fine’

‘Is that right?’ asked the lawyer, making a note of the point in a large dossier he carried with him.

‘What one earth would someone go to an escort service for? That’s horrible,’ said the philosopher, shivering slightly. The philosopher stared ahead of him as the other two continued about their business. ‘Absolutely terrible. I don’t understand people at all.’

‘And look here,’ said the lawyer, holding out a stack of magazines which he had pulled out of a desk drawer while looking for a pen: ‘pornography. Lots of it.’

‘Odd for someone who was apparently so well thought of by his colleagues. I mean, why else would they have called in such well-established professionals as us?’ mused the doctor.

The philosopher coughed. ‘Sorry, professor,’ said the doctor. ‘Two such experienced professionals and one such exalted professor of philosophy.’ The philosopher preened slightly and the doctor and the lawyer bowed politely shallow bows towards him.

‘Nevertheless,’ said the philosopher, ‘I still don’t get it.’

‘There is, in the words of the novelist, nothing in a man’s sexual habits which, if known, would not shock his fellow men,’ said the lawyer, flicking idly at one of the magazines: pausing once in a while to whistle slowly through clenched teeth.

‘Disgusting, I call it,’ spat the philosopher, wiping his tiny spectacles furiously as though to wipe away the stains of the dirt he had seen. ‘Revolting.’ He frowned at the lawyer who put down the magazine he was reading with a slight blush.

‘I suppose it might have been good for his circulation,’ mused the doctor, staring thoughtfully at the bare wall, as though trying to remember some distant but moving episode from this life.

‘I thought it was supposed to make you go blind,’ mumbled the lawyer.

‘Reeaally?!’ asked the doctor, in a elongated fashion, which mirrored his own fascination at the proposition. ‘Can I borrow your pen while I write that down?’

‘Of course you may,’ said the lawyer, proffering the instrument with a shallow bow. The doctor accepted it with an equivalent pitching forward from the waist.

‘It makes you wonder what it’s all about, doesn’t it?’ said the lawyer, idly picking up another magazine as the doctor scribbled in a leather-bound notebook.

‘What do you mean?’ asked the philosopher.

‘Well,’ said the lawyer. ‘All of this man’s interest in ... well ... *sexual relations*.’ The lawyer brandished the magazine he was holding as he hissed the last two words. The other two stayed very still: more than a little shocked at the lawyer’s conversational turn. He went on anyway. ‘I mean ... his regular withdrawal from the bank and so forth. Part of a routine. From what we have seen of all the deceased we have to deal with ... all of this interest so many of them had in *relations* right up to their death. All this interest in creating new life ... all that passion ... and then just empty death. It just makes you wonder, doesn’t it?’

‘It doesn’t make me wonder,’ answered the philosopher, ‘I think the whole business is terrible.’

This line of conversation had so unsettled the three men that they lapsed into an efficient silence and completed their duties as quickly as they knew how. The doctor selected a standard form from his bag, ticked the category he assumed was closest to

the cause of death, and laid the sheet of paper on the table in the centre of the room together with a copy of his invoice. The lawyer signed the form he had been filling in before, leaving out the bits that he did not understand, and placed it next to the doctor's documents with a copy of his invoice. The philosopher squinted through his pinched spectacles at a sheaf of philosophical statements which he had had copied from a student textbook to offer the bereaved some comfort. Giving a slight shiver he selected one which was headed "On chastity" and left it on the table with a copy of his invoice.

The three men assembled at the door and took one last, lingering look at the emptiness of that front room. Three minds with but one thought: our fees will never be paid from this little lot. At length, the lawyer turned the handle on the front door and allowed a small flurry of snow into the snug parlour as he opened it. The doctor bowed slightly and passed through, closely followed by the philosopher who had picked an apple from a fruit bowl by the door as he left.

Without looking back or locking the door, the lawyer passed through behind the others and set out into the freezing night. He was slightly pre-occupied because he had just remembered that they had not found out who had sent the cheques on the dead man's birthday. 'Never mind,' mused the lawyer to himself through his muffler, 'someone is bound to know what to do.' He cheered himself with the thought that perhaps the mystery benefactor would pay his fee.