

TWO PEOPLE, each writing a letter to the other. They write every week by air-mail, he from South America, she from a small detached stone house on the outskirts of a small detached stone village in Kincardine, Scotland. Consequently the letters often cross. They are Peter Warmington and his daughter, Rachel. They have not seen each other for eight years, when she was three, and he, bruised after the divorce from Rachel's mother, went off to teach English literature to Spanish-speaking students in the university city of Tocoquipa.

Rachel's mother, you understand, is a tolerant well-balanced woman, and bears no malice. She has not married again. She has no time. Her life is full. She has a good friend, a dentist, a very superior kind of man a little older than herself, and then there is bridge, and the golf club, and Scottish dancing, and unpaid voluntary work for the S.N.P., and a tea-shop in the tourist season. Rachel's mother made a mistake in marrying a weak-kneed academic from the South of England, but she does not hold his weak knees against him so long as they are no longer tucked under her sheets, and she is happy that Rachel should correspond with her father. It gives the girl something to do, and, truth to tell, there is not a great deal else for Rachel to do in Kincardine.

"What do you find to write about, darling?" Rachel's mother hardly ever writes letters, when it is so easy to pick up the phone. "It's not as if anything ever happens to you."

"I write about my thoughts." About her thoughts, and the birds in the garden, and the rabbits on the edge of the wood, and the solitary bewildered badger who came almost to the edge of the garden one grey dawn, sniffed suspiciously at the daylight, and lumbered off again,

head down, towards the shelter of damp earth and leaves, watched only by a little girl at an upstairs window. About the books she reads—two a day sometimes. Never about her loneliness, because she does not know that she is lonely, only that there is something missing; she doesn't know what.

"Isn't Rachel ever lonely?" the dentist sometimes asks. "She never seems to have any friends."

"Of course she has friends, you ridiculous man. She has friends at school."

"Doesn't she ever bring them home?"

"Oh, I haven't time for that sort of thing. She's a great reader, you

know. She's very self-reliant. She gets that from me."

"I have been trying to teach my students to appreciate Charles Dickens. This is difficult, since all the talented ones persist in regarding him as a political writer. It's no good attempting to persuade them that Dickens' picture of London or the Potteries bears very little relation to the facts of life today. They just won't have it."

"As for the untalented students, they aren't interested in literature at all. They only want to learn commercial English, so Dickens isn't much use to them either. Imagine trying to compose a letter of applica-

tion for a job in the style of Mr. Micawber.

"Anyway..."

Anyway, now he comes to think of it, give or take the differences in geography and climate, the shanty town just outside the city of Tocoquipa is not all that different from the slums of Victorian London. There is as much hunger, as much disease, rats, vermin, all the ills of grinding poverty. Pockets are picked, dead bodies discovered in mysterious or haphazard circumstances, children put out to work or beg by parents who have no work themselves. And meanwhile in their quiet villas at a decent distance from all this squalor, the rich, very like their counterparts in the novels of Dickens, eat rather too much, drink a little more than they should, think themselves excellent fellows, and go regularly to church on Sunday mornings to give thanks to the Almighty for arranging that they should live so very comfortably on the sweat of the poor.

Some of his students have told him as much. Useless to explain to them that Dickens himself did not dislike the rich, extending his compassion to the poor only provided that they / continued on page 17

MINUS 1
ITV's exciting new series *Armchair Thriller* begins this week with a two-episode story of the adventures of young Rachel Warmington who is caught up in mystery and murder on a trip to London to meet her father. This special Episode Minus One turns back the clock and outlines the events of Rachel's life before she makes that fateful trip...

Episode Minus One

by Bob Smith

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the last day of term on Friday so I do not have to attend school for 4 weeks. Dear Father, I am looking forward to seeing you after such a long time. I don't know if I shall be able to recognise you because in the photograph you sent it is hard to see your face under the wide hat. I asked Mother if she had kept a photograph, but she says the past is past. I am so much looking forward to see you and I'm not at all nervous of travelling



ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHEN BURGESS

continued) remained in that state of life in which God had placed them, and that the fate reserved by him for his heroes had nothing to do with the Revolution, but was to be adopted by some elderly benefactor well blessed with worldly goods. They would not accept that explanation from him. "Ah, you are joking, sir," they would tell him. "It is the English sense of humour."

It is not worth Peter insisting that they are wrong, nor when he considers the risks they run in speaking of such matters at all. He does not like to think of the risks they run. Anyway, he must not think of it. It is not his business.

"Anyway, I'm not a political animal, as you know."

If he were at all political, he would not hold his present job. "Well, my dear Peter," the head of the department had once said to him, "if one is to be brutally frank, you're not the best qualified man, but I've always been fairly sure I could rely on you to keep your nose clean." And Peter's hand went almost instinctively to his pocket handkerchief, and he wiped his nose, and since then, whenever he finds himself close to the head of the department, he has wiped his nose, for if he did not hold his present job teaching English literature to the Spanish-speaking students of Tocoquipa University, it is not clear whether he would hold any university post at all. The head of the department is not English, of course—his elder brother is the Minister of Defence—but he speaks English very correctly, and with a keen grasp of idiom.

Peter Warrington keeps his nose clean. He is not a political animal.

He does not know why so many of his more talented students are political, when it is so dangerous to hold political opinions of any sort. The extent of the danger fluctuates, but it is never safe. There have been students (he tries not to think of them) who have simply disappeared from the campus. There have been students (he certainly does not approve of them) who have disappeared of their own accord to "go underground" and who have performed such wicked actions as to kidnap leaders of the business community, and to shoot at policemen. He can still remember (but he tries not to remember) Jaime, a very talented lad, a poet in two languages, a sentimental impulsive young man but with no real harm in him, who was actually taken out of Peter's class by the police, to be first tortured and then shot. Jaime's father was rich, a rancher, one of the country gentry; there was no reason for his son to be political. It had been a Shakespeare class—"Daffodils that come before the swallow



dars, and take the winds of March with beauty," but the police had come instead, in white uniforms with guns, and had dragged the boy out of class, and later shot him. His girl had come to Peter, sat in a chair in his office, and wept for two hours. She was not one of Peter's own students; she was a student of biology.

There are no daffodils in the environs of Tocoquipa, but a kind of wild hyacinth grows high up in the mountains.

Peter Warrington goes in the evenings to the English Club of Tocoquipa. He has one drink there, never more than two, and passes an hour or so with the English-speakers of the English Club, very few of whom nowadays are English. Juan de Soto, a charming man, everyone's friend, a lawyer, has taught him to play gin rummy, but he does not play often, since this is not quite the rummy of his childhood, and it is possible to lose considerable sums of money. Although Peter thought himself well paid when first he went to Tocoquipa, the salaries at the university have by no means kept pace with an inflation of more than 100 per cent per annum. In any case, as much as he can, Peter is saving money. He is to have a sabbatical, six months in England on full salary. He will be able to see his daughter, Rachel.

He leaves the English Club, and walks home to his small flat not far from the university. It is safe to walk, for the club, like the university, is in the better part of the city, where the streets are well lit and well policed. He has an omelette with a salad and a small bottle of his special beer which contains only 3% alcohol. Sometimes, should he feel particularly in need of comfort, he fries himself some chips. But usually his comfort is of the mind. He has his gramophone with records of music by Mozart, Handel, Haydn, Boccherini, Telemann and Bach. He has his books.

If you were to ask Peter if he is lonely, he might be offended. "No man is lonely, when there are books to read. A man who reads has the best company in the world." Yet he knows well enough that he is lonely. That is of no importance. He has always been lonely; he is used to it.

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Peter has never been "good with people," whatever that means; he thinks that this is probably why his marriage broke up. His weekly letters to Rachel, and her replies, make up the closest communication he has with any other human being.

Only a little while now, and the term will be over, and Peter will be on the plane to London. He is not sure whether any of his clothes are still fit to wear; and though there is plenty of wear in them, they may not be fashionable. He will have to find a small flat, just like this small flat. He does not wish to stay with his daughter in a hotel. Two rooms would be ruinously expensive, particularly so if all their meals had to be eaten in the restaurant. And Rachel, like himself, is a vegetarian. Even at such a distance, he has won that small victory over her mother. A hotel would be unsuitable, expensive and inconvenient. He must find a flat.

HE WAS, as he caught himself doing too often, thinking of Rachel when the tinnny trrring of his flat doorbell jerked him back into some sort of awareness. In his odd, quiet uncomplicated world it was incongruous somehow that anyone should be calling on him at this time of evening. In a way he felt both molested and intrigued as he moved towards the door.

For a second he did not remember the coffee-coloured face, elfin only because of the enormously great feline eyes. It was a beautiful face; far more beautiful than the last time he had seen it, awash with anguish and streaky rivulets of tears. Peter remembered. It was Jaime's girl.

Oh God, he thought, she hasn't come here for another session of weeping and wailing . . . He could do without all that. He could not have put it into words but he was keeping all his controlled emotion in store for Rachel. There was none of it to be squandered on passing ships.

But there was no adolescent sorrow in those huge eyes. Fear perhaps, a little determination even, but no misery to be seen. She looked as if she was about to speak.

"Mr. Warrington," she blurted.

"Please . . . please forgive me. I do not mean to disturb you but I . . . I must talk."

Peter pulled himself into professional shape. He smiled broadly and invited her in. She would soon go, he thought.

She was young, not more than 16, and she moved her slender body with that strange pre-sexuality of a schoolgirl. Yet again this was odd because he knew the relationship between her and her now dead boyfriend to have been a physically mature one.

For a moment, and he did not feel shocked by the idea after his years as a tutor, he thought that perhaps she had come for sexual solace. The idea did not displease him although he knew his instinct would prevent him from venturing along that path, no matter what.

She sat down and came directly to the point.

"Mr. Warrington, I am in trouble. You can help. You don't have to, but you can help."

Peter answered just as directly. "Are you pregnant?" He'd asked that question of worried young girls so often before it almost made him feel comfortable slipping into his familiar tutorial role.

"No," she said. "But some friends of mine are going to be killed. Friends of Jaime's. Perhaps me too. They'll kill me as well . . ."

A kaleidoscope of terrified thoughts swept aside the schoolmaster. He snatched for his handkerchief and wiped his nose. His safety felt threatened as it had never been before.

This girl, he now knew, was mixed up with the revolutionaries. At the time they came and took Jaime away and she'd cried afterwards he had never connected her then with the political affairs of Jaime. But of course she'd be involved. She was of that age of idiot dedication to The Cause. Probably any cause.

No reason for him to get into trouble. If she was going to act like a fool then it was nothing to do with him. No affair of his . . .

He consciously asserted some self-control. A part of his mind was childishly willing he was back home and this girl was Rachel and there she was confessing some shallow misdemeanour.

He said, more gently than he felt: "Is it all this political nonsense?"

"It's not nonsense. It's about freedom and honesty and justice and all our futures and . . ."

His hand waved down the routine diatribe. My God, would he ever come to terms with the passions of the young? "All right, all right, all right. What sort of mess have you got yourself into?" Then as a frightened afterthought—"You're not on the run, are you? They're not after you? They're/continued on page 19

continued/not coming here?"

Sensing his fear she smiled, the scorn apparent, momentarily giving her the whip hand.

"Jaime wasn't the main one in our cell."

"What cell? Were you in prison with him?"

"I mean cell like in spy cell," she said. The academic in him flinched at the weight of this awful problem. He sat down heavily.

She then told him everything. She did it briefly—with terrible economy, it occurred to him later. The revolutionary party, called the U.D.C.—United something-or-other—was far better organised and potentially powerful than anyone thought. Anyone not involved, that is. And of course, the established government. They knew just how great a threat the U.D.C. was becoming. That's why they tortured Jaime before they shot him. They knew he knew something.

"Did he tell them what they wanted?" said Peter, fascinated again in spite of himself.

"He must have. They wouldn't have shot him until they got what they wanted."

She went on: "Jaime was a very brave man. But he was human like anyone else. There would have come a point when he would give in."

Jaime, apparently, had simply been a go-between, a message-carrier. The U.D.C. had arranged through its foreign connection to have supplied to them some £10 millions worth of arms. They were to come in via a tortuous mountain route and distributed throughout the country by a complicated and devious process carefully worked out by the 18 cells that made up the organisation. Plans for the eventual takeover of the country—radio stations, government utilities and offices, army posts and so on—were geared to as near perfection as any coup could expect. All that was needed for the final push were the arms. As far as the U.D.C. could tell, said the girl, although the government knew a lot about them and that they were going to get arms, they weren't aware of the delicate networked web the U.D.C. had poised to drop over the entire country.

"Even Jaime didn't know how far advanced our plans are," said the girl. "I did because I am second-in-command of our cell."

Peter couldn't believe what she was saying. This mere scrap of a girl, only a few years older than Rachel, involved up to her pretty little ears with vast revolutionary plots. It was all too preposterous.

At that second Peter ached for home as he had never done before. He wanted escape. Now.

"Look, my dear. I'm sorry about all this, but frankly I don't want to know. If you are in trouble I'm sorry, I really am. Why don't you



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... if they are after you try and run away. You can't stay here.

"I really have no feelings for your politics or getting mixed up with anything. I am a teacher. I'm from a different country." He checked himself short of hysteria.

The girl seemed to ignore him. "You remember the day they took Jaime away from your class? That night was the night the arms came in. Jaime must have lasted out long enough for it to be too late for the authorities to stop them."

"You've got them then?" Peter's astonishment overtook his fear.

"They're already distributed," said the girl.

"Then why are you afraid? Why are you here? If what you are telling me is correct then the revolution must be practically all over. Why are you worried? Who's going to kill you? And Jaime's friends? Oh, I don't understand all this. Just ... just get out."

She sat looking at him for a full two seconds before the door burst open. Peter felt it was his heart.

Suddenly there were uniforms everywhere, with the stark insignia of the government—gross red flashes, overhung with a sword.

The girl didn't scream or anything like that, although Peter did. He saw the girl being grabbed by all these terrible, intruding men. Thank God she's not Rachel he thought as he fainted.

A MOST anxious face looking into his own was the next image he experienced. He felt as though he had died and gone to heaven. The face said: "Come on now, you're all right. Take it easy, you'll be all right." It was all so soothing and comforting that it took some seconds before he remembered, and distrusting the whole situation he flung himself upright.

"This is nothing to do with me," he shouted wildly at the face in the uniform. Peter Warmington's self-preservation, never far below the surface, had surfaced like a Polaris missile. "I'm not with her ..."

"Take it easy. Calm down, easy, easy, easy ..." said the face, now materialising into a solid whole human being. He was young, scarred on the left side of his face. The eyes

were black but there was real concern in them, so much so that Peter calmed, both in spite of and because of, himself.

Peter looked around, eyes flickering like a threatened woman. There was no one else there. The police or the army or whatever they were had gone. Peter looked up slowly. His eyes said please don't beat me.

"Now, that's better Mr. Warmington. You've got nothing to worry about." The uniform and the black eyes had now found their rightful role, just part of the person who at this moment at least was not an immediate threat to Peter.

"What ... what have you done with the girl?" said Peter. "She's only a child. Don't hurt her please. She doesn't realise what she's doing. She's a child, a baby."

The man in the uniform looked quite sad. The expression changed. "That doesn't make her the less dangerous though, I'm afraid." He sighed most theatrically. Peter couldn't believe the callousness of it all.

"What will you do to her?"

"Stop her causing trouble."

"You won't kill her ...?"

"I'll try not to, but we may have to."

The man in the uniform squatted on his haunches, immediately in front of Peter's chair, and looked up frankly into his eyes. "Tell me something," he said, "would you have helped her?"

"No, no," Peter said quickly. "I'm nothing to do with your troubles."

"Hmm," said the man in the uniform, "I think I probably believe you. It's a shame really, that you don't care."

Peter said nothing. For the first time in minutes on end he thought of Rachel.

The man said: "I know exactly what the girl told you. She told you we had taken Jaime from his class, that we tortured him and then shot him. That is true. I personally pulled the trigger. She told you that Jaime held out long enough for the arms shipment to be delivered before he cracked under our ... interrogation. That is true. She told you she was second-in-command of the local cell." He waved a hand. "Also true."

The man in the uniform scuffed his foot on the floor, almost like a

naught boy, thought Peter. "What she didn't tell you," he said, his eyes moistening ever so slightly, "and what she couldn't tell you, is that ... that she's mad."

"Since she was a small girl she has worked for the U.D.C. in one way or another; as a messenger, a soldier of a kind—even as an assassin. But somewhere along the line something went wrong. Her brain sort of ... broke down. The U.D.C. is not a massive organisation geared to take over the country tonight, tomorrow, next year or even the next century. There are other cells—through the entire country there are probably four. The biggest and the mightiest is the one here. We organised the arms run. She told you there were millions of pounds worth of guns coming in over the mountains, didn't she? Well, it was two sten guns and three rifles on the back of a donkey.

"Even to get those Jaime stole the money from his father. The authorities thought the threat of the U.D.C. was much bigger than it was. It wasn't appreciated that the biggest cell of all comprised a leader, a young student, and a ... a ... mad girl with delusions far beyond the U.D.C.'s achievements."

Peter looked on, appalled, but at least feeling safer now.

"The Movement will go on," said the man in the uniform. He glanced up again at Peter. "But the events of tonight need not bother you. No one's going to harm you. I'd have shot you if I thought it necessary. I had to kill Jaime to stop him giving the girl's name away."

"Others will join the Movement and one day ... one day ... perhaps £10 millions worth of arms will come over the mountains. For the moment, there's only me left ..."

The man in the uniform leapt up, slapped his gunbelt and slammed out through the door.

Peter sat there for a long while. Then he got up, made a cup of tea, and re-read the last letter from Rachel.

IN ANOTHER part of the city, in a flat considerably larger and more expensively furnished, the young lawyer Juan de Soto is also preparing for a journey to London.

He must begin his journey well before Peter does, for he will travel by a roundabout way, first to Baghdad, and then to Paris, breaking his journey for a few days in both cities. In Baghdad he will meet friends, some of whom he has met before. They will exchange information. He will be given money. In Paris he will meet friends whom he has never met before, and an associate, a woman with whom he is to continue his journey to London. He will be given a gun / continued on page 20

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continued/of a rather special sort. It is, we may say, a business trip.

Though he is a lawyer, Juan does not seem to practise much law. He is not one of that small courageous diminishing group of advocates in Tocoquipa, who are prepared to defend those accused of political crimes. These men are themselves liable at any time to arrest and to murder. They are not respected men, as respect goes. Certainly they would not be accepted as members of the English Club.

If you ask Juan about his practice, he will tell you that it is entirely commercial. "I'm afraid I really don't know the first thing about criminal law," he will say, "I'm a perfect fool, believe me." Nobody does believe that Juan is a perfect fool, and he does not expect that they should, but a becoming modesty is part of his charm.

Since Juan has a commercial practice, it is natural that he should be often out of the country. His clients (everyone knows) are companies and corporations; their interests are world-wide. Nobody in Tocoquipa has ever heard of Juan de Soto appearing in court to argue a case, but it is natural that a lawyer of his kind—a top-class expensive man—should never go to court. Part of his skill must lie in keeping himself and his clients out of court.

It occurs to nobody that, at the age of 32, and only seven years out of law school, Juan is a little young to have reached such a top-class and expensive position. To the members of the English Club and of the Jockey Club (in which the leading officers of the police and army are to be found) it seems obvious that a man who spends money, both on himself and others, as lavishly as Juan de Soto does must make a great deal of money, and if he makes so much practising law, he must indeed be a top-class man.

Juan himself will happily admit he has a very poor degree in law, and is almost as much a fool in commercial matters as in criminal. "It's just that if you're dealing with millions, some of it is bound to stick to your fingers, win or lose," he says. This proves to the members of the English and Jockey Clubs that Juan is a top-class man, because only a top-class man would be able to get near to any millions in the first place.

The truth is that Juan de Soto has almost no commercial practice at all, and the law books in the study of his expensive flat are seldom opened. His clients are only rarely companies and corporations. Nevertheless, those who employ him do have access to a great deal of money. Juan would not work only for money. He is an idealist; he is, quite unlike Peter Warmington, a political animal. But he is also a professional. He will not work for no money, and since he is a skilled professional—a top-class man after all, though not in the practice of law—he is expensive.

He is going to London on a job.

"The shop didn't have any apples, and the yoghurt had not arrived from Perth, so I was requested to eat school dinner for once. I told Miss McWhinnie that it is degrading to eat the flesh of animals, and she reported me for imper—" Rachel consults the dictionary for which her father sent the money three Christmases ago, "—impertinence. In the end I had mashed potatoes and greens without gravy. There were lumps in the potatoes. I would have explained to Miss McWhinnie that fasting may actually be good for the system, if done in moderation, but I was afraid that she would lose her patience altogether.**

"Mother says that she expects you to phone when you arrive, and then she will make the final arrangements. It is the last day of term on Friday so I do not have to attend school for 4 weeks. Dear father, I am looking forward to seeing you after such a long time. I don't know if I shall be able to recognise you, because in the photograph you sent it is hard to see your face under the wide hat. I asked Mother if she had kept a photograph, but she says the past is past.

"I am so much looking forward to seeing you, and I'm not at all nervous of travelling by myself . . ."

Three people converging on London, at different times, by different ways, with different objects. Every day people from all over the world, and from all over Britain, arrive in London. Usually, we may assume, they find what they expect, do what they have come to do, and go away again. Not always.