

THE VERDERER

Anthony Riggs removes the chiffon paper from around his recently purchased gloves. He relishes the sweet smell of new leather and admires the gloves' fine craftsmanship before slipping them onto his bare hands, careful not to set a single finger on the outside surface. The gloves are of exquisite quality, and Anthony believes they will make a fine gift for some lucky relative when he returns to Boston. After all, he plans to wear the gloves just once, and for the briefest of moments.

The winter morning is dark at this hour, a condition accentuated by a soup of London's thickest fog. Anthony looks out the window of the bus in which he is riding. He can barely make out the naked trees and signposts by the side of the street, but it does not matter. He has traveled this route countless times in the last 12 months. He knows every street and every house along the way.

As the bus finally approaches the desired stop, Anthony sees a luxurious automobile backing out of a driveway in this upscale residential neighborhood. The tail and headlights enter the

fog, but do little to illuminate it. Anthony watches the car drive into the street and quickly disappear from view. "Perfect timing," Anthony says to himself. "Mrs. Dixon is out of the house, and Nigel is home alone."

At the bus stop, Anthony steps into the thick fog and immediately feels the damp air penetrating his clothing like cold fingers wriggling through his black scarf and overcoat. Walking purposefully toward the driveway from which the luxurious automobile has just exited, Anthony eyes the number on the mailbox: 129. He has arrived.

Anthony slinks up to the front door, completely undetected, and rings the doorbell. He hears the muffled chimes through the walls and waits silently on the low, stone porch. A visitor so early in the morning, Anthony knows, will catch the house's owner by surprise and make him hesitant to open the front door.

A porch lamp jumps awake above Anthony, but its weak light fragments into a million dull particles in the fog. Just to be sure, Anthony's face is mostly covered by his low-hanging hat and scarf. The door opens just a crack, enough for Anthony to see the warm glow of a living room lamp behind the suspicious slice of face that cau-



Donald Mulligan

*A CENTURIES-OLD AFFRONT
DRIVES A POLITICAL OFFICER
TO PLAN A METICULOUS REVENGE.*

By JOHN D. BOYLL

F O C U S

tiously peeks out at him.

"Yes — who is it?" the man behind the door asks hesitantly.

"Nigel Dixon?" Anthony asks, filling his words with urgency.

"That's right."

"Mr. Dixon, your wife has just had an auto accident. May I come in?"

It is a ruse, of course. It has, however, the planned effect. As the door shuts, Anthony hears the chain lock being undone. The door flies open in an instant.

"Please, come right in," the homeowner says. "Where is she?"

"It just happened; I got here as fast as I could. No need to call an ambulance, the paramedics are on their way," Anthony says as he closes the door.

"Where are they taking her?! I must go meet them," Nigel says, turning to a closet to find his coat.

Nigel Dixon is visibly distressed, and his body shakes with nerves. Anthony notices the sumptuous turtleneck sweater that Nigel wears, and cannot help but think how appropriate it is. Anthony has awaited this moment for over a year, or perhaps a lifetime.

Anthony glances at his watch. It is exactly 6:30 a.m. With his back to Anthony, Nigel cannot see the insulated wire rising high before it comes down over his head and around his neck.

When Anthony began working at the U.S. embassy in London four years ago, it was like a dream come true. As a political officer, he was tasked with learning as much as he could about life in the British Isles, and he took the assignment to heart. Anthony faced no great challenge, however, as he already possessed more knowledge about his host country than many of the natives. His family lineage demanded no less of him.

Anthony's ancestors journeyed to Boston from Britain hundreds of years ago — that much he knew from an early age. His English heritage was a source of great pride as he grew up, to the point that he dedicated his university studies to all things British, including attending Oxford as an exchange student.

Beginning then, Anthony cultivated a British accent

John D. Boyll currently works in the U.S. embassy in Mexico City and has served with the State Department in Manila and Frankfurt. He enjoys writing works of fiction and humor in his free time.

and an even more fervent affection for the land of his ancestors. He wore only English suits, English shoes, and English spectacles. He had easily become, as his American friends observed, more a Londoner than a Bostonian.

It was this dedication that slowly dissolved Anthony's endearment to America, and he came to feel like an alien in his own land. Though he was soon to be sworn into the American diplomatic service, he did so with one goal in mind: to be assigned to London for as long as possible.

It took several years, but Anthony was finally given his chance to call London home, albeit with a foreign passport and a very impermanent assignment. It was of no matter to Anthony. He was at last where he belonged, and he was sure of only one thing: he wished his ancestors had never left such a wonderful, civilized place.

After just two years in London, Anthony had married Maggie, the loveliest, most enchanting subject that the Queen could ever wish for. As a result, the legality of Anthony's permanent stay in London was finally a matter of mere paperwork. Still, he was already scheduled to return to Washington for his next diplomatic assignment. Should he throw his career away to stay in England where he belonged?

It wasn't a difficult decision. Anthony had no equal among Anglophiles, and would now draw even closer to his forefathers. But the exact details of his English heritage were not completely clear. Anthony knew that his family were loyalists in the American Rebellion, as he called it, but it was not until he delved passionately into his family's genealogy during the next year or so that he uncovered something unexpected, truly sinister.

Jonathan Riggs, whose son journeyed to the New World and from whom Anthony's family descended, was not a rich man. He was so poor, in fact, that his surname was awarded to him posthumously by his widow and chiseled into his crude headstone. As a man of no means, Jonathan was married to the land and to the land alone. He was very old by the time he took a common-law wife — about age 30.

Providing for a wife and a child, though, turned out to be more than Jonathan could afford. He felt prosperous enough, having a family and a lifelong job of toil, so long as his lord's land would yield crops. He was short, however, of one important thing: food. Living next to the king's forest as a serf meant living in a world of constant temptation, and this was Jonathan's cross to bear.

F O C U S

The blood on his hands was nothing short of beautiful, until the verderer demanded that Jonathan drop his bounty.

The king's verderer traveled on a magnificent steed, and carried a sword that by all accounts was far too large to be wielded practicably. The sword, the verderer claimed, had killed 70 men. Whether the claim was accurate did not matter. The verderer, known to history only by his surname, Dixon, knew that he could not personally guard the entire perimeter and area of the king's forest all at once. To do his duty properly, the verderer relied on the reputation of his sword to be where he could not.

Jonathan knew that the forest was forbidden territory and that neither fowl nor fawn belonged to him. Jonathan also knew that his family would soon starve unless he took matters into his own hands — and game was only plentiful in the king's hunting grounds. Jonathan walked to the edge of the forest many times, yearning for some unwitting creature to bound out of the thicket and into his desperate grasp.

Though Jonathan had seen the verderer somewhat frequently in his last days, he knew nothing of espionage, and he knew nothing of instigating a crime. He was so simple, in fact, that Jonathan did not think it odd when the verderer himself invited him into the forest to see what game he might find. After all, Jonathan thought, his family was obviously in need and the verderer must have noticed.

When Jonathan finally emerged from the forest, he carried two enormous pheasants and new hope for the goodness of life. The blood on his hands was nothing short of beautiful, until the verderer demanded that Jonathan drop his bounty and present his palms. The verderer declared Jonathan guilty of theft, having been caught "red-handed."

The verderer's blade met its mark, and the very next day Jonathan's family fled the vicinity, and made plans to begin a new life. The verderer's cruelty was what forced Anthony Riggs' ancestors to the British colonies in America, according to the public records and private diaries dredged up by the curious confluence of a mutual interest in genealogy — shared by Anthony and one Londoner, Nigel Dixon.

After months of Internet communication with Nigel and mutual assistance in constructing two separate family trees, Anthony discovered his connection to that age-old day of deceit and treachery. Thereafter, Nigel wrote but one single, acrimonious e-mail in response to Anthony's revelation. It is burned forever into Anthony's mind: "It appears one of mine murdered one of yours. Bloody good show! History shows that yours are the filth of the earth, mine are the gems — and history cannot be undone."

The muscles in Anthony's arms are taut, frozen in a powerful isometric contraction. He stands over a gasping Nigel and calmly thinks of how beautifully his yearlong preparation paid off. He added detailed knowledge of London bus routes, timetables and weather patterns to his already extensive understanding of British history, politics and economics. The hours of secret footwork, researching Nigel's background and tendencies, his likes and dislikes, tracking and timing his daily routine — it was all worth it now.

Anthony is controlled and deliberate in his work. As Nigel's body slowly succumbs to its fate, Anthony watches only his wristwatch. Ten minutes is a long time to wait, but he is patient. It will now take him exactly five minutes to walk the four city blocks and catch the 6:45 bus. It is the same bus line Anthony took to arrive at Nigel's house, but it goes in the opposite direction and has a different driver. It has all been carefully thought out.

On the bus again, Anthony wraps his leather gloves carefully in the tissue paper once more. At his stop he buys one dozen roses, and goes directly home to tell Maggie the good news: their trip to the States will only be temporary, because he is now determined to live in London for good.

Anthony has no worries. He is certain his guilt will never be known, for he has left nothing for Scotland Yard to work with. As the lonely city bus winds its way through the dense fog like a submarine in the thickest of brines, Anthony breathes deeply and peacefully. His deed is history now, and history cannot be undone. ■