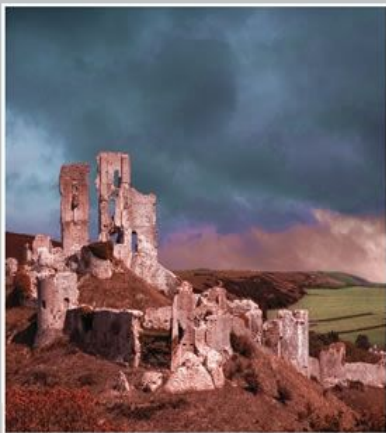


O C A S O P R E S S : A N O V E L

The Madness of Summer



Colin Holcombe

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by Colin Holcombe

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THE MADNESS OF SUMMER

— A NOVEL —

Colin Holcombe

Chapter One

So we stayed, the model family at the Buck-mayne Annual Pageant, until the curtain fell around nine o'clock, when I saw Megan and my wife off and returned to the Community Centre, squeezing past Council members and performers to where Martins was brandishing our drinks.

'What was that again?' I said when we clinked glasses.

'Whittaker, my dear boy, I was asking about the woman you were avoiding earlier.'

'Celia.'

Martins pulled out a notebook. 'Celia the fairy was played by . . .'

'Imogen Lawley.'

'Played by Imogen Lawley, who looked ravishing in a lavender-blue number. Any more charm-ers you know?'

'Penny Lawley. In white over there, talking to the vicar. She was the shepherdess.'

'I do know my Iolanthe. In fact I'll go over to have a word with her now, which will let you get back to the sister.'

'Just wanting an interview.'

'Imogen can ask me any time. But hark, the damsel approaches.'

'Imogen,' I said reluctantly, 'this is Joel Martins, director of Casebook Films. Imogen Lawley, reporter on the Dorset Times.'

She surveyed the plump figure with its tangled mop of grey hair. 'Doesn't look like a film director to me,' she decided, staring up through those extravagant lashes.

'Very true,' conceded Martins, for whom Imogen posed in an enticing innocence. 'But we have to employ the most unlikely types. Even Stephen

here is going to be a star of the small screen. History in the Community, Time and Tradition. We haven't decided on a title yet. Depends on what we find locally. Could be quite rewarding, wouldn't you think?'

'I don't know what you mean, Mr Martins.'

'I mean you should come for a screen test.' He gave me a flustered look before turning back to the woman who smiled at him indifferently. 'With your sister. We need local people.'

'Which sister, Mr Martins?'

'Good God, Whittaker. Is the place overrun with talent?'

'Whole tribe of them', I said gloomily, wondering if Martins knew what he was taking on.

But in fact Melissa had married and moved away, to Ludlow or somewhere, the smart wife of an accomplished country lawyer. Penny was the left-over, the damaged goods, and only Imogen could be called shameless, the vamp with the pale green eyes and snub nose. 'Excuse me, you two', I said. 'Ought to circulate.'

'Who now?' said Martins, reaching for his notebook.

'Ted Ten Percent. Imogen will explain.' The woman gave me an open stare: Imogen with the tight hold on life, who gives exactly what she promises.

'I shall come over shortly, as soon as I've tied up a screen test with this entrancing damsel.'

You'll be sorry, I thought, threading my way over to a raffish and clearly inebriated Edward Tennant at the drinks table. He surveyed me expectantly, screwing up an eye. 'Dr Whittaker, I believe. The very man.' He turned to the barman. 'I say, could you give us something decent? Johnnie Walker maybe.'

'Thanks, but I'll stick to this.'

'You should accept hospitality when it's offered. Not every day that a patron of the Dorchester art scene is so lavish.' He leant over the table, extracted the bottle from the barman, and topped up his drink. 'Sure?'

'Didn't know you'd moved into the arts.'

'I am a patron of everything worthy in the area.' He ignored my look, and handed the bottle to the barman, who saw it safely back under the table. 'Who's the untidy man in the loud suit?' he said, nodding across the room.

'Joel Martins. Director for the new TV series.'

'You keep strange company, but I expect it was Jill's idea.'

'Eddie, the opportunity grew out of the BBC Time Watch series, as you know. After we made those finds at Leyton.'

'Well, I hope Jill's persuaded you to leave the shabby respectability of academic life. To spread your wings, and perform on the greater stage of life.'

Clearly, he didn't know the situation, and I let him continue.

'Now listen, Whittaker. I'm going to bend your ear with something you wouldn't have dreamt of in a thousand years.'

'Nothing to do with your website, I hope. The local tourism article Phil Duffy drafted and you rewrote, bringing threats of legal action.'

'Nothing like that.'

'And there was the bust-up with Saintly Sandy, remember, after your funny piece about the Church Fete. Not to mention the unpleasantness with the Countryside Association.'

'We are now a responsible, well-informed and forward-looking company.' He swilled his drink, and sniffed thoughtfully.

'So what is it?' I said, seeing the bartender give me a jovial wink.

'You've seen your write-up there?'

'Book on local history, forthcoming TV series? Yes, most satisfactory.' I looked around for someone to join.

'Well, we've added to it', he continued. 'Not that much. Still the smashing photo.'

'The pugilist with the angry freckles? I didn't want you to use that one, Eddie.'

'Now bear with me, Whittaker, old man. You have to look the part.'

'No I don't.'

'As the organiser of the Leyton Rings Festival.' He pushed back a lock of hair and said, 'Good name that, what d'ye know, almost Celtic.'

'Festival? What festival?'

'The Leyton Rings one we're helping you with, Imogen and I.'

'Wait a minute', I said. 'You're organising some event up there. On the Leyton Rings?'

'Not really a rock concert. A celebration of alternative lifestyles.'

'Not on my dig you're not.'

'But it's not your site, is it, old sport? More the Stoke Monkton Archaeological Centre's.'

'Which I run.'

'Under the auspices of Bath South University. Isn't that a grand name?'

'Is this going somewhere?'

'Now the farm's been left to the girls and Phil Duffy', he continued, staring into his glass as he emptied it. 'And of course I don't know why. I'm just saying the girls got ninety per cent, but Duffy's is the remaining ten. All of them think the festival is a good idea, a fantastic idea.'

'God almighty, Eddie, have you thought of the consequences, even supposing you got the funds? Or the publicity?'

'That's where you come in, with your TV series.'

'There won't be a series if a rock festival happens.'

'It's not a rock concert, though they'll be a lot of music. Perhaps ancient stuff as well.'

'Not the Pagan Historical Centre? You're not roping them in, are you? The Countryside Association would go ballistic.'

'Everyone is catered for. Quite ecumenical. A multicultural event to put Dorset on the map.'

'Dorset does not need to be put on the map. It's overrun with tourists and second-homers as it is. You should read the letters in the local press.'

'I do. Imogen writes them. Or some of them.' He beamed at my annoyance. 'Whittaker, I just thought I should sound you out before pushing ahead. Of course you'll get your stall there. Or you could run a tour like the Saturday rambles. Up to you. Everyone's enthusiastic about getting academic kudos.'

'Getting me the sack, more likely.' First came the hours explaining the TV series to Jill, to whom status and respectability were family virtues, and now there would be shabby evasions to my Principal. 'Listen, would you?' I said. 'You can't just barge in and take over. It's taken months, years in fact, to get this TV series going. Endless meetings, screenshots, a whole army of consultants and focus groups.'

'Which will pay off.'

'Jill didn't see me for weeks. You've no idea what trouble that caused.'

'Seems to me you're sunk either way, old man. But you can talk it through with my partner.'

'No thank you.'

'As you like. See my friend here has another drink', he said to the barman, and strode off, the sleek crest of hair flapping as the head lurched forward.

'You're a difficult man to keep up with', said Martins when he emerged, breathless again. 'That was Ted Ten Percent, I take it. Nothing to do with what our fairy told me?'

'No.'

'Whittaker, my dear boy, you're supposed to be showing me around, filling the scene with local colour. Can't just leave it to Imogen, can we?'

'What's she been saying?'

'Something about a Leyton Rings Festival, which you're committed to.'

'On the contrary, I am not in the slightest committed. I've only just heard about it.'

'Well, it would be an almighty spanner in the works. The archetypal market town, a scene

steeped in the past and its ancient customs, slowly adapting to change but keeping its character. Then we learn a whacking great rock festival's arriving. Hardly the thing, is it?'

'It's an alternative culture festival, apparently.'

'Call it what you like, but it's not going to wash. Our viewers want to escape into the past, to belong to the unchanging rhythms of rural life.'

'I get the picture.'

'You need to do more than that, my dear boy. You need to kill it off.'

'Phil will see sense, and Penny won't have given her permission. There's another daughter somewhere, too.'

'Melissa. Imogen's spoken to her. Another hopeful who can hear the cash tills ringing.'

'Christ.'

'So I can leave it in your capable hands?'

'All right. I'll start with Penny.'

But the woman wasn't now talking to the vicar, and in pushing through to the far side of the hall I

collided with Neville Barnes, who put a heavy arm across. He was wearing the usual red shirt, which now looked ironed for a change. 'Just a moment, Doc', he said.

'Trying to find Penny Lawley. She was around here.'

'You should talk to me.'

'Shortly.'

He settled his weight on the other leg. 'Now what's this I hear about your blocking the Leyton Rings Festival? Tell us it's not true.'

'Look, Ned, I don't want to discuss it. I can see all kinds of problems, but maybe something toned down will keep everyone happy.'

'What problems?'

Anything involving Barnes causes problems would be the truthful answer, but I mumbled something about permission and policing.

'Fascists.'

'Then there's the Countryside Association. They have a lot of influence round here. Courts, local government.'

'Lackeys of the bourgeois dictatorship.'

'I need to see Penny.'

'You won't get anywhere with her.'

Any more than you did with Imogen, I was tempted to remark. Barnes's mooning after the predatory Imogen has been one of the happier topics of conversation for years. 'Ned,' I said, 'let's have this conversation another time.'

'We've always supported you.'

'Lots of volunteers from the Pagan Historical Centre. Yes, most helpful. Can I find Penny now?'

'More than helpful. Without us you'd never have got started.'

'Well we did. Once those finds came to light.'

'Handy, weren't they?' He looked pleased, as he does when the odd thought blunders into that brutish head.

'Now don't be silly.'

'You hadn't thought about that, had you?' He gave me a friendly shove.

In fact I'd been thinking about them a lot, and even Phil admitted they were a puzzle. But you can't ignore evidence, and the dig started.

'You want to know how we did it?'

'If you've been playing games I don't want to know. All right?'

'The Dorset Times, Wiltshire Gazette. Probably the BBC. I mean, would you want to build a whole series around a hoax? Expert fooled by locals. Dr Steven Whittaker was last night shown to have been taken in by a joke perpetrated by the locals of Buckmayne, the town which is to feature in a television series. Doesn't sound too good to me.'

'We found corroborating evidence.'

'Of course you did.' He leered at me.

Was that why the Pagan Historical Centre had been so keen to help? I began to feel uneasy. 'Think I'll go and see Penny.'

'She's on our side.'

‘Not if she’s got any sense,’ I growled, the famous anger beginning to make itself felt, ‘you great Bolshevik lump.’

‘Now see here, Doc. Don’t you start calling me names, or there’s a few things we could say about you.’

But the temper was up. ‘Just get out of my way, would you? You and the pagans, for Christ’s sake.’

‘But at least we don’t have people humping our wives, do we?’

‘Push off, Ned.’

‘Twice a week while hubby is out archaeologizing. The supercool hospital administrator. Bet she’s not so cool then.’

I raised my fist but had it caught in a tight grip. ‘Just remember what we’ve got on you.’

‘Nothing’, I said, feeling the blood swelling the veins and the eyes hurting. I was conscious of people looking, and then Martins was ambling over. ‘Not dull here, is it?’ he said. ‘Like to fill me in?’

‘Just a difference of opinion.’

‘Nothing to do with that festival? I do hope not, my dear boy, because I’ve just been talking to, let me see, an Aubrey James. He was surprised to have the news.’

‘Jones. Countryside Association man.’ Yes, Aubrey wouldn’t be pleased.

‘Seemed to intimate there could be serious trouble. Mentioned the pagans.’

‘Joel, go home. I’ll sort this out, and see you in the morning.’

‘No, they sound interesting.’ He made a note with his thick pencil.

‘As you like’, I said. ‘Neville Barnes is over in the corner.’

‘I am hastening there this very moment. But Jones not James? Right, got that.’

He plunged into the crowd, on the far side of which I could now see Jones lifting his eyebrows at me. I waved and intimated I’d be over shortly, while I looked round for Penny. Perhaps she was changing out of her costume, or had gone home.

I fought my way to the exit, smiling at several who wanted to detain me, and placing the glass on the small table by the door. Old Mrs Rainer nodded as I went through into the night air. Penny was not in the car park, and I was slowly turning to go inside when I saw a figure on a bench near the war memorial.

‘Aren’t you cold like that?’ I said, coming up and draping my jacket round the bare shoulders.

‘You had enough of the celebrations?’

‘You were very good. Everyone said so.’

‘Thank you.’ She turned and gave me that enigmatic smile. ‘But I’m glad it’s over.’

‘You could probably take it on tour. I heard Tessa Jones has plans. Even Yeovil.’

‘What did you want to talk about?’

That was Penny: abrupt, not one for small talk. ‘Well, it doesn’t have to be now, but sometime I would like to discuss the festival. What Eddie and Imogen seem to have cooked up.’

‘Oh, the festival.’

‘As I say, sometime.’ She didn’t respond, but stared across the dark street and down the hill to where the stone frontage of the Black Swan glowed in the floodlights. A car started up, and there were snatches of conversation behind us from the Community Centre. People were going home, or for a last drink somewhere. ‘I think tongues are going to wag,’ I said, ‘if we sit here too long.’ She didn’t move and I was uncomfortably aware of how near she was, and shifted a little.

‘People always talk’, she said, looking up and smiling.

‘Well, with the most . . . ’ But I couldn’t think of the right word, and added, ‘Look, it’s getting cold. Perhaps we can talk some other time?’

‘Imogen said she’d run me, but you can take me back if you like.’

‘To Leyton?’

‘If Jill doesn’t mind.’

It seemed churlish to refuse, though the figure looked fuller in its low-cut dress, the large eyes

and hair in loose curls resembling some intaglio of the Ptolemaic queens long before Cleopatra was thought of. 'Do you need to change?' I said.

She seemed not to hear, and said, 'Is that your car over there, the Rover?'

'I'm arranging something better with Jill shortly.'

We didn't speak for a while, and I tried not to remember Penny as I had first met her: the queen of the county, locals had told me, though that title probably belonged to Melissa.

Penny caught me looking at her, and smiled. 'Like old times', she said.

'So why don't you tell me about the Leyton Rings Festival?' I said, glancing in the rear mirror. 'Everyone else seems to know about it.'

'Do they?'

'I'm only making conversation.'

'You're not uncomfortable with me, are you, Steven?'

'I don't want you to read too much into it.'

'Think Jill will come back?'

'When whatever she's holding out for is satisfied, no doubt. Like most women.' I resented making the comment, and we drove on in silence, turning off on one of the minor roads. 'Wasn't directed at you', I added.

'Do you still want her to come back?'

'Can we talk about something else? It's just a temporary misunderstanding.'

'Seven years is more than temporary.' She half turned to look at me, but then wound down the window. I could feel the night air with its warm smell of cattle and fields, into which Penny's perfume dissolved, so unlike the metallic scents that Jill prefers, which set her off as someone neatly tailored and in control of things, which of course she is. Abruptly I changed gear as we approached the steep stretch that leads to the Rings, not replying when Penny went on, 'It's still there, you know.'

'The first turning on the left, isn't it?'

'The land of lost content.'

‘Penny, I’m sorry about your marriage, but that’s it.’

‘And I’m sorry about yours.’

‘That’s well out of bounds’, I said. What did she expect—a surrender to that dreaming nature that undid my father, made him into the introspective failure, the man who never made a single friend?

‘Steven, I’m talking about something else. When you were at home here. At Leyton where everything has its particular shape and colour. You were more alive then.’

‘Everything comes at a price, doesn’t it? As I keep telling Jill, you can’t run the house, look after Megan, be a university lecturer and TV personality all at the same time.’

‘But you don’t have to be any of those, do you?’

‘Sink into the country yokel, is that what you’re saying?’ Penny was as sensitive as I was to surroundings, but I wasn’t buying into that line.

'You've missed the turning, though I expect it looks different at night.'

'You were talking,' I said as the signpost came up on the right. 'We'll go down to the valley and back by the other route.'

'But you wouldn't sense it.'

I let the remark pass. There was now a moon that lit up the white gash of the road and threw shadows under the wind-bent hedges.

'Don't you feel the night breathing into us?' She wound the window right down. 'Is that better?'

'Just chilly.' I began to wish I'd not offered the lift, and we now had even more time together.

'You should let life happen. That's what I think.'

I could feel the closeness of the woman, the drowsy happiness in the body, but with the schoolteacher's practised common sense I said, 'So that's how your marriage worked out, is it? Just happened, and then didn't happen.'

'You don't understand.' She looked at me and smoothed down the dress. 'I lost my bearings when I left the area.' The voice was hurt, and I was again annoyed at my words.

We drove up the hill and stopped by the farm entrance, where I got out and unfastened the gate. When I turned, Penny was standing close to me, the look enigmatic and penetrating. 'Unless you want to enter the land of enchantment?' she said.

'I'll leave fairy matters to Imogen.'

'Steven, it's nothing to do with power or spells or history. It's finding the right person.'

I laughed savagely. 'You can't seriously think that.'

'We'll all be here in two weeks' time. Melissa too. She'll come if Imogen and I haven't found someone.'

'I don't believe it, not of grown-up people.'

'Come in and talk to me about the festival. I'd like that.'

‘Just stop there, will you? It’s a madness, however much you or Imogen need the money.’

‘We have to survive. Even you.’

‘I’m going to say goodnight.’ I hoped she wouldn’t feel the reluctance in the words, which hung in the air.

‘Goodnight Steven.’

I took the hand, finding it warm and inviting, but climbed swiftly back into the Rover, and for some reason wound up the window before swinging the car round. I saw her in the rear mirror make an elaborate curtsey—a strange, vulnerable but entrancing image that stayed in my thoughts the whole drive back to Buckmayne.