

## The Janitor

It was a mistake to stop and look in the mirror. The sight of his face never improved his mood. He turned away and continued to shuffle about the flat in his pyjamas, grunting now and then in response to a thought that passed through his head. Vincent was a man whose notoriety had become a terrible burden. People did not spot those heavy features and ask themselves: 'Is that really him?' They knew it could only be him. He was the depraved man they saw three times a week on the television. He was trapped in the persona of the ugly and boorish college janitor in a hugely popular soap opera, an unlovable man created as a contrast to the more endearing characters.

Now, in the isolation imposed by his celebrity, he felt himself becoming the brute that he played on the screen. If only, he thought, he had been cast as a figure of distinction: a QC perhaps, or an urbane detective like Morse.

On the days when he was not in the studio rehearsing and playing that dreaded part, he had begun to hide. Yesterday he went to the study room at the library – surely a place where people minded their own business, he thought. But a group of students had spotted him and amused themselves by taunting him, emitting the trademark grunt with which the janitor responded to every approach made to him.

At RADA he had been tipped for success – his strange and powerful appearance and his undoubted talent would surely carry him far. Some of the great Shakespearean roles could even have awaited him. But now there seemed to be no way out of the snare that he had stumbled into. The only parts he was offered these days were as monsters.

Now he was standing in his kitchen, devouring handfuls of cereal straight from the packet and washing them down with milk gulped from the carton. All the bowls and cutlery were in the sink, unwashed. Then some instinct directed him back to the mirror, where this time he lingered long enough to take in his appearance from head to toe. He shook his head several times at the **derelict creature that faced him**. 'This can't go on,' he announced gruffly, 'time to pack it in.' The decision to resign from his TV contract was taken in that moment of desperation.

The studio was reluctant to let him go, but he would not be dissuaded. Over the next two weeks they filmed all the scenes needed to write him out of the story, deciding cleverly but cruelly to cast him as the chief suspect in a brutal murder committed on the campus. His evil character made him an obvious choice and evidence was created to link him with the murder weapon – an empty wine bottle. In his last scene he was shown being driven away in a police car.

His contract allowed him no grounds for complaint and the popular press, knowing the public's fascination with evil, made much of this twist in the story, using particularly horrible pictures of Vincent. For a period the ratings soared, but then began to slip back in the absence of the character the public loved to hate.

With murder added to his other sins, Vincent's image was now such that he dared not go out in daylight. He began to be obsessed by the thought that the producer had made a victim of him. That man had projected onto the hapless janitor all his own nasty instincts. He had not given him a single redeeming feature.

Vincent ceased to shave and for weeks he sat at home watching the television. Then he began to take notice of the many 'make-over' programmes. He saw people given new confidence by a transformation in their appearance. He analysed the image of the brute that the make-up department had created from his unusually prominent features. The patchily-shaved head and the added thickness they gave to his eyebrows produced a Neanderthal look. The stubbly jaw, the darkened teeth and shabby clothes completed the picture.

Encouraged by the transformations he saw on the TV screen, Vincent mustered the courage to visit an expensive hairdresser he had seen performing on Trinny and Susannah's programme. He was relieved that this man did not seem to recognise him, although he hardly seemed the soap-viewing type. He did a beautiful job in trimming the beard and skilfully left the shock of wiry black hair that had grown by now, looking natural yet perfectly shaped. Visits to a cosmetic dentist and a famous men's outfitter completed the make-over. The distinguished man now reflected in his mirror was definitely not one to be messed with – a captain of industry at least, or perhaps a diplomat, he thought. His posture and his gait adjusted imperceptibly to fit his new appearance; his speech took on a refined Edinburgh lilt.

Deception was the essence of his art and Vincent, the capable actor, had succeeded in burying that uncouth character without trace. Eyes did not turn his way as he strolled the public places that he used to avoid.

He signed up with a new agent and began to pick up small character parts under the name of Stuart Grierson. Then, by a combination of cunning and inside knowledge, he landed the role of the new College Principal in his old soap opera. The imposing and rather quirky character that he created became central to the success of the show. The ratings were climbing again and he was indispensable. He signed ever-shorter contracts, making more and more outrageous financial demands until the programme had to be 'pulled' on the grounds of its prohibitive cost.

A party for the cast and crew was held in the studio on the last day, and a number of ex-members also came. As they began to assemble, the producer sat in his office, looking round him regretfully. A prosperous chapter in his life had ended. How he had relished the power, like that of a puppeteer, to manipulate his characters and to shuffle their relationships.

Then the door opened and he was astonished to be confronted by his most extreme and savage creation. Vincent, his make-over now reversed, sidled in. On his face was the evil leer of the former janitor. Dangling from his hand was an empty wine bottle.