

“THE DEATH GAME”

“Latest news! Latest news! A dead body found near Saint Thomas Hospital!” a high-pitched voice shouted repeatedly like a siren that broke the afternoon calm.

“Give me a copy, please” said a tall man with a high-quality black coat that covered his pallid face up to the nose.

He had blond, curly hair, green eyes with brown scales, high cheekbones and pointed ears. He was with a thin woman, slightly shorter than him and covered by a fluffy wool coat, probably made of fox fur, with wavy hair and brown eyes, skinny face and with a multitude of freckles on his cheeks.

“What do you think, Clay? An interesting case or an ordinary case like the Collins’ pumpkin one?” asked the woman, leaning towards *The Times* without slackening the grip.

At the beginning he didn’t answer, probably because he was reading the newspaper, but after he raised the chin out of the coat and said, pensive: “Not bad Ivy, not bad... In one of Saint Thomas’ hospital corridors the police has found a body. It is a 30-year-old man, called Philip Stevenson, there is a writing that says that the man was killed by a fragrance and, more important, they have discovered that the fragrance box has a double outside layer. Between the layers they have found a cheat sheet that says: “*1:00 PM: are you ready to play my game? If you solve this case you will have fame*”.

The man sprang on the side of the sidewalk calling a taxi that was moving towards them. <<To Saint Thomas Hospital!>> he ordered the taxi driver.

<<Oh, sister, how long I’ve waited for this case!>>

When they arrived, a policeman stopped them.

<<We are detectives Clay and Ivy Nut, we want to see the man who was killed.>> said Clay showing their ID cards.

The policeman let them in with a wave of his hand.

When they got to the murder scene they saw the dead body of a caucasian man lying on the ground on his left side, with short black hair, a long and pointed nose that clashed with his chubby face and little mouth.

He was wearing the hospital garments and he had a walking stick beside him.

Clay kneeled down in front of the defenceless body observing it very carefully.

<<Parkinson>> he whispered, gingerly passing his thumb on the side of the man's mouth <<Look Ivy>> he said in a high-pitched voice. <<He has desiccated saliva on the side of his mouth, it means that he had swallowing problems, he walked with a cane. They are symptoms of Parkinson but I can tell he was in the final moments of his life and close to death...That means that the killer murdered him for revenge because he didn't wait for the person to die from the disease, but he committed the homicide before>> he explained to his sister with a deadpan look, like an archer ready to shoot his arrow to the enemy.

Ivy went near to the man's wrist and she smelled it carefully.

<<He was murdered with cyanide>> she said, getting away with a grimace <<It smells of rotten almond>>

Clay did the same and nodded. Afterwards, he took the fragrance out of his pocket.

It's clear that the poison was inhaled through the fragrance and the man has died in a short time>> deduced Ivy, sighing. Then with a powerful single blow, she removed the outside layer that concealed the piece of paper.

"1:00 PM: are you ready to play my game? If you solve this case you will have fame" read Ivy. <<He can't have written this paper. Parkinson's patients have micrographia, whereas this handwriting is good. In my opinion it wasn't a suicide>> said Clay.

Ivy stood up and said proudly: <<We will play your game.>>

<<It isn't possible!>> Ivy exclaimed, astonished; she stood up sharply from the sofa staring at the television with her eyes wide open, drawing her brother's attention. <<There was another murder, this time at Archbishop's Park and the same thing happened again.>>

<<What did they say?>> Clay asked, intrigued, hurrying down the stairs.

<<Scotland Yard has found a woman's dead body, she's thirty years old, too, she's got the same perfume that Philip Stevenson had and...>> she barely swallowed, rubbing her hands nervously. <<A note>> she added with a smile.

<<You know I hate waiting, come on, speak, what does it say?>> he urged her.

<<2:00 p.m.: *The riddle you have to solve, for the problem to dissolve*>> Ivy said.

Clay laid his hand on the pillar next to him, broody.

<<What does *"but before the riddle you have to solve"* mean? It doesn't quote any riddle, how we can guess something that doesn't exist?>> he exclaimed irritated, punching the marble.

Ivy sighed. <<There is one way.>> She had a pale and sweaty face, her hands angrily writing but, despite this, she had a determined, almost deadpan look, which revealed a brave and cultured personality.

<<Probably he will continue the murders and in each of them put parts of the riddle,>> she assumed.

At those words Clay stretched his back lifting his gaze upwards full of defiance and pride, like a Greek warrior who is preparing for the battle.

<<He's so playful, our murderer. Are you joining us Ivy?>> he joked.

<<With pleasure, sir.>> she played along.

<<Therefore let's show him who we are.>>

Ivy was staring at the clock hanging on the wall, staring off, while in her brain there were thoughts circulating, reasonings and guesses which excluded and supported each other like souls moved from Hell's wind, aimlessly.

Sometimes she stood up jubilant but, just after, she sat down again on her sofa closing her eyes and diving into her thoughts.

The moon's light filtered down from the window, a cold winter night's breeze was shaking the curtain as if it wanted to make it alive.

Outside, people, unaware of the events that were happening, were celebrating with their friends, they were playing and laughing, waiting for the midnight that would have lead to the New Year.

<<11:00 p.m.: *What can it be?*>> read again Clay the "Times" article with a bitter tone.

<<It's eleven o'clock p.m. on New Year's Eve and eleven murders have already occurred and every time we have found a female or male lifeless body...at St. Thomas' Hospital, at Archbishop's park, just before Lambeth Road, in Kennington Road, in Newport Street Gallery, in Pedlars Park, on the Thames, in front of Starbucks and, finally, behind Westminster a few minutes ago. Everyone had the same perfume and the same age group.>> he recapped nervously. <<And now he is playing with us?>> he almost yelled, throwing the newspaper that he was holding in his hand to the ground; he was red with anger.

<<1:00 p.m.: *are you ready to play my game? If you solve this case you will have fame.*

2:00 p.m.: The riddle you have to solve, for the problem to dissolve. 3:00 p.m.: You can't ignore it. 4:00 p.m.: You have to respect it. 5:00 p.m.: Time is its buddy. 6:00 p.m.: But you

can change it. 7:00 p.m.: If you want to cross the ocean. 8:00 p.m.: It won't wait for you. 9:00 p.m.: It sets your day. 10:00 p.m.: You can find it of many types. 11:00 p.m.: What can it be?>> Ivy recited. <<These are the notes on the victims...The riddle is complete. What is it Clay? The year?>> assumed the woman, holding on to her brother's eyes, that showed self-confidence.

<< No, it's impossible, it has nothing to do with the "*3:00 p.m.; you can't ignore it*", it doesn't make sense... >> said softly. <<Damn!>> he shouted again, desperately running his fingers through his hair. <<It's been hours since we were here to discuss, and we haven't solved the riddle yet... look at the clock!>> exclaimed Clay, furious.

<<The clock...>> he repeated, stopping suddenly with eyes wide open and a half-open mouth with his lips and hands trembling for the emotion, a drop of sweat went down from his temple, slowly as if it was doubtful about the path to take, stopping on the brink of the face, ready to jump to the empty space that separated it from death. <<But of course... You can't ignore it because you need to organize the day agenda, it sets the time, but if you cross the Atlantic Ocean you have to change the time because of the timezone, it doesn't wait for you when you are late, it sets the day with timetables and, finally, it may be a wristwatch, a pocket watch, a wall watch, a cuckoo, a pendulum, a table clock.>> she said, raising her voice as they proceeded with the explanation. <<But what does all this have to do with the murderer?>> she asked, bewildered.

Clay's eyes seemed to travel inside the clock that was in front of him as a mathematician who tries to understand a problem he has never faced before.

<<Bring me a map, Ivy!>> he whispered, with a barely perceptible voice. His sister ran to the chest of drawers and opened the last drawer, getting a London map.

Clay seized it without saying anything, resting on his desk, taking a divider and a pen.

<<Ivy, we are inside a clock.>> he said smiling enigmatically.

The woman approached, leaning toward the map, badly lit by an old lamp.

<<If we mark all the points where there has been a murder, we get a curved line and if we link the hour of death to them, what do we get?>> asked Clay with decision.

<<A clock.>> answered Ivy, trying to follow her brother's reasoning.

<<But what's missing?>> asked her Clay.

<<12:00 p.m.>> Ivy answered immediately, confused.

At those words Clay closed the curved line obtaining a circumference, and marking the point corresponding to the 12:00 p.m. in red. <<And what does it match with?>> smiled

Clay, stepping away from the shelf.

<<The Big Ben!>> answered his sister, realizing where her brother was going with that. <<He wants us to lead us there.>> she deduced. <<But what if it was a trap?>> <<It could, but if we don't go there, we will never find out! Come on!>> exclaimed Clay, who in the meantime had already grabbed the coat and reached the door.

The dark wrapped the lamplights as if it was protecting them from the cold of winter, you could barely hear the cheering voices passing under the windows of the houses celebrating, with people waiting for those thirty minutes that separated them from the new year, from a new possibility for redemption, a year in which they could have changed, improve themselves from the mistakes made during the year. Almost as if that time, that abstract thing invented by men themselves, those 1,800 seconds could erase their sins, giving them a new, better life.

Once in the street, Ivy checked the time. <<It's half hour to 12:00 p.m.>> she snorted, biting her lip, irritated.

<<We will never find a taxi at this time.>> said Clay, kicking a stone nearby. <<Heck, we must go on foot.>> he hissed, starting down hastily along the road. <<It should take about ten minutes from here. It is not far away.>> he added, putting a hand in his pocket. <<Take these.>> he whispered to his sister, handing her two earplugs. <<Put them on when we are inside the Big Ben.>> he ordered, then he also gave her a black object that she could not distinguish in the dark of night.

Ivy took it hesitantly, but when she had it in her hand, she held back a cry.

<<But it is a gun!>> she whispered, with her voice broken by surprise. Clay nodded with eyes veiled by fear.

<<Keep it handy, we don't know who we could meet>> he said with an emotionless tone, showing her sister the gun that he was bringing in his pocket. With a trembling hand, Ivy put hers in her purse trying not to show her feelings. The trip was silent as if the two of them didn't want to risk to open their mouth to ask each other to go back. The closer they got, the more commotion they heard on the streets, only once they reached the tower, they understood why. <<Damn! It is New Year's Eve, we will never get through if we don't have the tickets!>> exclaimed Clay in a loud voice to contrast the noise of people that was lined up in front of the Big Ben to see the midnight show. Around them there was a fence and the police officers were checking who went in. Clay took her sister arm-to-arm,

approaching to one of them with the ID cards in hand.

<<Good evening, we are Clay and Ivy Nut and we must get in for urgent matters>> he almost screamed to be heard by the guard.

<<If you don't have the ticket, you can't enter>> he answered impassive.

<<No, we must get in. We don't have the ticket, OK, but it is indeed an urgent matter>> he exclaimed irritated, showing him the documents that the guard looked and laughed away.

<<They are only two pieces of paper that could easily be fake, you have no idea how many people want to get in, but who doesn't have the ticket just like you, and that makes up anything to be able to see the show>> the police officer laughed. <<Look, I don't care if we can or not, we are two investigators and inside there, there is an assassin!>> Ivy screamed impatiently, pointing out the Big Ben.

<<So, if you don't want to be his next victim, you'd better let us through!>> The guard opened his mouth, but he didn't make a sound.

He grabbed their ID badges and after a fast glance he returned them nervously grinding:

<<Of course, you can go, but only this time, understood?>> Without even answering, the two siblings got in, pushing people to reach the entry of the Big Ben.

<<Twenty minutes left!>> screamed Ivy. The air was heating around them, there were people screaming and laughing eagerly awaiting.

When they arrived, they saw that the door was already open.

<<We can make it if we hurry>> Clay said, going in first. <<They are about three hundred steps, let's move>>.

As the door closed, the outside commotion disappeared almost completely, only a confused and homogeneous noise remained.

<<Ivy, take the gun and put on the earplugs>> said Clay with a detached voice, performing those actions shortly after followed by his sister.

While they were walking up the stairs the fear was palpable and the heartbeats were so fast that it seemed they could have exploded at any moment.

<<Stop.>> Clay whispered when they arrived on top.

The silence was in the air, only their heavy breathing troubled that aura of peace. It was almost completely dark, the only lights were badly hung on the walls for the tourists.

<<Good evening>> a serious voice greeted them.

Ivy screamed reaching the gun and her brother did the same, back to back, getting ready.

<<No no no no>> the same voice repeated, with an encouraging tone as if he wanted to

calm them down. <<You must not worry, I don't want to hurt you... Even if I hoped you would be more>> he continued.

<<I will not believe you until I see you, coward!>> Clay hissed with a firm tone.

<<Uh, you're brave, are you really sure you want to see me? It's not really a great view>> the voice laughed with a calm tone.

The two siblings didn't understand those words that, a short man, perhaps thirty years old, bald and with his eyes at the height of the cheekbones, a crooked mouth and a bent nose, his skin with darker spots and his arms and feet smaller than normal, showed up into the light, going out of the recess where he was hiding some meters away from them. The two couldn't hold back a moan of disgust, but the man didn't notice it, evidently used to that reaction.

<<Yes, I'm deformed, a horrible deformed man, a monster, don't you think?>> he asked, smiling. A glow in his right hand attracted Ivy's attention.

<<What are you hiding?>> she said with a light tremor.

<<Ah, this you mean?>> he asked with a falsely surprised tone showing them an object that only after a few instants they could identify. <<Yes, it is the famous perfume of my invention. Not bad, uh?>> he said looking at it with marvel. <<But keep calm, it's not for you.>> he added.

<<Why have you killed those people? What did you want from them?>> Clay continued holding the gun in front of him.

For the first time, the man's face changed, showing a great anger, that made Clay and Ivy step backwards. The man's face turned red, his arms trembled while his fingers were twisting as tentacles. <<What did I want from them?>> he screamed with a trembling voice taking a step forward. <<What *they* wanted from *me!*>> he continued in a fit of rage but, suddenly, he opened his mouth surprised, immediately calming down. <<Sorry, I didn't want to frighten you>> he continued, returning to the calm tone of a few minutes before. <<All the victims were my college mates, the worst exponents, so to speak.

They continuously derided, mocked, insulted me for my physical appearance. I have spent the worst years of my life, believe me.>> he explained while walking anxiously back and forth. <<It was in that moment when I chose to kill myself...My friends couldn't help themselves from feeling guilty. So I decided to create the "Game of Death"...nice name, isn't it? I met them all and gave the perfume to each one. Such fool people! They tried it on as soon as I left. They completely fell for it.>> he said while laughing hysterically and

playing with the perfume. << The police as pawns, my mates as squares, death as dice... And me as the ending. Swell, uh?>> he was talking like a crazy person.

<<And now, don't you want to know who is the twelfth victim?>> he asked them with a sweet voice. <<It's me>> concluded the man, while intensely smelling the essence on his wrist. He immediately started to cough violently, touching his chest and kneeling on the cold floor of the tower. In the end, nothing could be heard but the thud of his lifeless body falling violently on the ground.

Ivy got closer to him and took the bottle of perfume. She opened it and noticed a little note with the following writing: "*12.00 p.m.: You played my game. Happy new year to you who found me. Kevin Raveng*".

The total silence was interrupted by a strong chime followed by an explosion and people's joyful shouts.

<<It's midnight>> Ivy whispered, crumpling the note angrily.

<<Well done. That was a well-thought-out murder, worthy of being remembered.>> Clay murmured.

The twelfth chime rang as to mark a death sentence.

Clay refused to watch the fireworks and to listen to the joyful screaming coming from the near little window, and which were in deep contrast with the dark surrounding atmosphere.

Then he said with an emotionless voice: <<Happy new year, Ivy>>.

Ivy, who was about to walk down the stairs, replied: <<Happy new year, Clay>>.

"The Times"

The Death Game by James David Bourchier

Yesterday in London there were eleven murders at intervals of one hour. The victims are thirty years old and they have been poisoned by a perfume created by the killer. The perfume contained a large dose of potassium cyanide, a poison which, if inhaled, provokes immediate death due to suffocation. The case was told us by Clay and Ivy Nut, the two investigators who solved the case. Clay informed us: "First, every bottle of perfume was provided with a double protective membrane and in the middle there was a note with

the time of death and a part of the riddle written on it. At eleven o'clock we knew every part of the riddle and we were able to solve it." "1:00 p.m.: are you ready to play my game? If you solve this case you will have fame". 2:00 p.m.: The riddle you have to solve, for the problem to dissolve 3:00 p.m.: You can't ignore it. 4:00 p.m.: You have to respect it. 5:00 p.m.: Time is its buddy. 6:00 p.m.: But you can change it. 7:00 p.m.: If you want to cross the ocean. 8:00 p.m.: It won't wait for you. 9:00 p.m.: It sets your day. 10:00 p.m.: You can find it of many types. 11:00 p.m.: What can it be?"

Ivy Nut added: <<This is the complete riddle and, I must say, resolving it wasn't easy at all.>> But that's not all because, a few hours after the killer's death, the police found a letter in the inner pocket of his coat, which told the incident in detail. Inspector Newater of Scotland Yard read it to us: "If somebody is reading this letter it means my plan has worked. Since I am dead, I have nothing to hide anymore and I will now tell you everything about the murders. I have studied the plan in detail. I have to admit I was a good man, but one afternoon, I thought about all the bad jokes my college mates did about me and the feeling of revenge persuaded me to get rid of them. The idea of the clock came to my mind after looking at the Big Ben. The clock is the instrument to measure time, which is an abstract and elusive concept. "Perfect", I thought. I planned the places where I would meet my mates and I marked them on a map so as to form the shape of a clock. The last place was the famous Big Ben. Since I owned a perfumes shop in the centre of London, I took twelve bottles and added a large dose of potassium cyanide in order to transform them in poison. To humiliate them even more, I wrote the notes using the paper from one of my mates' factories.

Kevin Ravang"