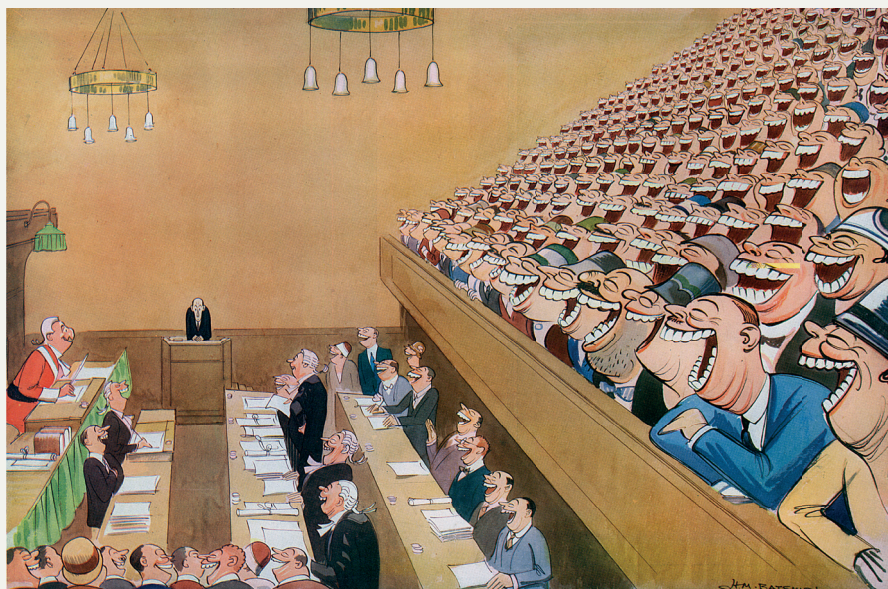




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John Mortimer The Trials of Rumpole



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The Trials of Rumpole

Sir John Mortimer was a novelist, playwright and barrister. The first book featuring his most famous character, Horace Rumpole, was published by Penguin in 1980, and Mortimer went on to publish a dozen collections of Rumpole stories as well as a handful of novels, culminating in 2007 in *Rumpole Misbehaves*. He was knighted in 1998 for his services to the arts and died in January 2009.

JOHN MORTIMER

The Trials of Rumpole



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For Leo McKern

Rumpole and the Man of God

As I take up my pen during a brief and unfortunate lull in Crime (taking their cue from the car-workers, the villains of this city appear to have downed tools causing a regrettable series of layoffs, redundancies and slow-time workings down the Old Bailey), I wonder which of my most recent Trials to chronicle. Sitting in Chambers on a quiet Sunday morning (I never write these memories at home for fear that She Who Must Be Obeyed, my wife Hilda, should glance over my shoulder and take exception to the manner in which I have felt it right, in the strict interests of truth and accuracy, to describe domestic life *à coté de Chez Rumpole*); seated, as I say, in my Chambers I thought of going to the archives and consulting the mementoes of some of my more notorious victories. However when I opened the cupboard it was bare, and I remembered that it was during my defence of a South London clergyman on a shoplifting rap that I had felt bound to expunge all traces of my past, and destroy my souvenirs. It is the curse, as well as the fascination of the law, that lawyers get to know more than is good for them about their fellow human beings, and this truth was driven home to me during the time that I was engaged in the affair that I have called 'Rumpole and the Man of God'.

When I was called to the Bar, too long ago now for me to remember with any degree of comfort, I may have had high-flown ideas of a general practice of a more or less lush variety, divorcing duchesses, defending stars of stage and screen from imputations of unchastity, getting shipping companies out of scrapes. But I soon found that it's crime which not only pays moderately well, but which is also by far the greatest fun. Give me a murder on a spring morning with a decent run and a tolerably sympathetic jury, and Rumpole's happiness

is complete. Like most decent advocates, I have no great taste for the law; but I flatter myself I can cross-examine a copper on his notebook, or charm the Uxbridge Magistrates off their Bench, or have the old darling sitting number four in the jury-box sighing with pity for an embezzler with two wives and six starving children. I am also, and I say it with absolutely no desire to boast, about the best man in the Temple on the subject of bloodstains. There is really nothing you can tell Rumpole about blood, particularly when it's out of the body and on to the clothing in the forensic laboratory.

The old Head of my Chambers, C. H. Wystan, now deceased (also known reluctantly to me as 'Daddy', being the father of Hilda Wystan, whom I married after an absent-minded proposal at an Inns of Court Ball. Hilda now rules the Rumpole household and rejoices in the dread title of 'She Who Must Be Obeyed'), old C. H. Wystan simply couldn't stand bloodstains. He even felt queasy looking at the photographs, so I started by helping him out with his criminal work and soon won my spurs round the London Sessions, Bow Street and the Old Bailey.

By the time I was called on to defend this particular cleric, I was so well-known in the Ludgate Circus Palais de Justice that many people, to my certain knowledge, called Horace Rumpole an Old Bailey Hack. I am now famous for chain-smoking small cigars, and for the resulting avalanche of ash which falls down the waistcoat and smothers the watch chain, for my habit of frequently quoting from the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, and for my fearlessness in front of the more savage type of Circuit Judge (I fix the old darlings with my glittering eye and whisper 'Down Fido' when they grow over-excited).

Picture me then in my late sixties, well-nourished on a diet consisting largely of pub lunches, steak-and-kidney pud, and the cooking claret from Pommeroy's Wine Bar in Fleet Street, which keeps me astonishingly regular. My reputation stands very high in the remand wing of Brixton Nick, where many of my regular clients, fraudsmen, safe-blowers, breakers-in and carriers of offensive weapons, smile with everlasting hope when their solicitors breathe the magic words, 'We're taking in Horace Rumpole'.

I remember walking through the Temple Gardens to my

Chambers one late-September morning, with the pale sun on the roses and the first golden leaves floating down on the young solicitors' clerks and their girlfriends, and I was in a moderately expansive mood. Morning was at seven, or rather around 9.45, the hillside was undoubtedly dew-pearled, God was in his heaven, and with a little luck there was a small crime or two going on somewhere in the world. As soon as I got into the clerk's department of my Chambers at Number 3 Equity Court Erskine-Brown said 'Rumpole. I saw a priest going into your room.'

Our clerk's room was as busy as Paddington Station with our young and energetic clerk Henry sending barristers rushing off to distant destinations. Erskine-Brown, in striped shirt, double-breasted waistcoat and what I believe are known as 'Chelsea Boots', was propped up against the mantelpiece reading the particulars of some building claim Henry had just given him.

'That's your con, Mr Rumpole,' said Henry, explaining the curious manifestation of a Holy Man.

'Your *conversion*? Have you seen the light, Rumpole? Is Number 3 Equity Court your Road to Damascus?'

I cannot care for Erskine-Brown, especially when he makes jokes. I chose to ignore this and go to the mantelpiece to collect my brief, where I found old Uncle Tom (T. C. Rowley), the oldest member of our Chambers, who looks in because almost anything is preferable to life with his married sister in Croydon.

'Oh dear,' said Uncle Tom. 'A vicar in trouble. I suppose it's the choirboys again. I always think the Church runs a terrible risk having choirboys. They'd be far safer with a lot of middle-aged lady sopranos.'

I had slid the pink tape off the brief and was getting the gist of the clerical slip-up when Miss Trant, the bright young Portia of Equity Court (if Portias now have rimmed specs and speak with a Roedean accent), said that she didn't think vicars were exactly my line of country.

'Of course they're my line of country,' I told her with delight. 'Anyone accused of nicking half a dozen shirts is my line of country.' I had gone through the brief instructions by this time. It seems that

the cleric in question was called by the somewhat Arthurian name of the Reverend Mordred Skinner. He had gone to the summer sales in Oxford Street (a scene of carnage and rapine in which no amount of gold would have persuaded Rumpole to participate), been let off the leash in the gents' haberdashery, and later apprehended in the Hall of Food with a pile of moderately garish shirtings for which he hadn't paid.

Having spent a tough ten minutes digesting the facts of this far from complex matter (well, it showed no signs of becoming a State trial or House of Lords material) I set off in the general direction of my room, but on the way I was met by my old friend George Frobisher exuding an almost audible smell of 'bay rum' or some similar unguent.

I am not myself against a little *Eau de Cologne* on the handkerchief, but the idea of any sort of cosmetic on my friend George was like finding a Bishop '*en travestie*', or saucy seaside postcards on sale in the vestry. George is an old friend and a dear good fellow, a gentle soul who stands up in Court with all the confidence of a sacrificial virgin waiting for the sunrise over Stonehenge, but a dab hand at *The Times* crossword and a companionable fellow for a drink after Court in Pommeroy's Wine Bar off Fleet Street. I was surprised to see he appeared to have a new suit on, a silvery tie, and a silk bandana peeping from his top pocket.

'You haven't forgotten about tonight, have you?' George asked anxiously.

'We're going off for a bottle of Château Fleet Street in Pommeroy's?'

'No . . . I'm bringing a friend to dinner. With you and Hilda.'

I had to confess that this social engagement had slipped my mind. In any event it seemed unlikely that anyone would wish to spend an evening with She Who Must Be Obeyed unless they were tied to her by bonds of matrimony, but it seemed that George had invited himself some weeks before and that he was keenly looking forward to the occasion.

'No Pommeroy's then?' I felt cheated of the conviviality.

'No, but . . . We might bring a bottle with us! I have a little news.'

And I'd like you and Hilda to be the first to know.' He stopped then, enigmatically, and I gave a pointed sniff at the perfume-laden haze about him.

'George . . . You haven't taken to brilliantine by any chance?'

'We'll be there for seven-thirty.' George smiled in a sheepish sort of fashion and went off whistling something that someone might have mistaken for the 'Tennessee Waltz' if he happened to be tone deaf. I passed on to keep my rendezvous with the Reverend Mordred Skinner.

The Man of God came with a sister, Miss Evelyn Skinner, a brisk woman in sensible shoes who had foolishly let him out of her sight in the haberdashery, and Mr Morse, a grey-haired solicitor who did a lot of work for the Church Commissioners and whose idea of a thrilling trial was a gentle dispute about how many candles you can put over the High Altar on the third Sunday in Lent. My client himself was a pale, timid individual who looked, with watery eyes and a pinkish tinge to his nostrils, as if he had caught a severe cold during his childhood and had never quite got over it. He also seemed puzzled by the mysteries of the Universe, the greatest of which was the arrival of six shirts in the shopping-bag he was carrying through the Hall of Food. I suggested that the whole thing might be explained by absent-mindedness.

'Those sales,' I said, 'would induce panic in the hardest housewife.'

'Would they?' Mordred stared at me. His eyes behind steel-rimmed glasses seemed strangely amused. 'I must say I found the scene lively and quite entertaining.'

'No doubt you took the shirts to the cash desk, meaning to pay for them.'

'There were two assistants behind the counter. Two young ladies, to take money from customers,' he said discouragingly. 'I mean there was no need for me to take the shirts to any cash desk at all, Mr Rumpole.'

I looked at the Reverend Mordred Skinner and re-lit the dying cheroot with some irritation. I am used to grateful clients, cooperative clients, clients who are willing to pull their weight and put

their backs to the wheel in the great cause of Victory for Rumpole. The many murderers I have known, for instance, have all been touchingly eager to help, and although one draws the line at simulated madness or futile and misleading alibis, at least such efforts show that the customer has a will to win. The cleric in my armchair seemed, by contrast, determined to put every possible obstacle in my way.

‘I don’t suppose you realized that,’ I told him firmly. ‘You’re hardly an *habitué* of the sales, are you? I expect you wandered off looking for a cash desk, and then your mind filled with next week’s sermon, or whose turn it was to do the flowers in the chancel, and the whole mundane business of shopping simply slipped your memory.’

‘It is true,’ the Reverend Mordred admitted, ‘that I was thinking a great deal, at the time, of the Problem of Evil.’

‘Oh really?’

With the best will in the world I didn’t see how the Problem of Evil was going to help the defence.

‘What puzzles the ordinary fellow is,’ he frowned in bewilderment, ‘if God is all-wise and perfectly good – why on earth did he put evil in the world?’

‘May I suggest an answer?’ I wanted to gain the poor cleric’s confidence by showing that I had no objection to a spot of theology. ‘So that an ordinary fellow like me can get plenty of briefs round the Old Bailey and London Sessions.’

Mordred considered the matter carefully and then expressed his doubts.

‘No . . . No, I can’t think *that’s* what He had in mind.’

‘It may seem a very trivial little case to you Mr Rumpole . . .’ Evelyn Skinner dragged us back from pure thought, ‘but it’s life and death to Mordred.’ At which I stood and gave them all a bit of the Rumpole mind.

‘A man’s reputation is never trivial,’ I told them. ‘I must beg you both to take it extremely seriously. Mr Skinner, may I ask you to address your mind to one vital question? Given the fact that there were six shirts in the shopping-basket you were carrying, how the hell did they get there?’

Mordred looked hopeless and said, 'I can't tell you. I've prayed about it.'

'You think they might have leapt off the counter, by the power of prayer? I mean, something like the loaves and fishes?'

'Mr Rumpole.' Mordred smiled at me. 'Yours would seem to be an extremely literal faith.'

I thought that was a little rich coming from a man of such painful simplicity, so I lit another small cigar, and found myself gazing into the hostile and somewhat fishy eyes of the sister.

'Are you suggesting, Mr Rumpole, that my brother is guilty?'

'Of course not,' I assured her. 'Your brother's innocent. And he'll be so until twelve commonsensical old darlings picked at random off Newington Causeway find him otherwise.'

'I rather thought – a quick hearing before the Magistrates. With the least possible publicity.' Mr Morse showed his sad lack of experience in crime.

'A quick hearing before the Magistrates is as good as pleading guilty.'

'You think you might win this case, with a jury?' I thought there was a faint flicker of interest in Mordred's pink-rimmed eyes.

'Juries are like Almighty God, Mr Skinner. Totally unpredictable.'

So the conference wound to an end without divulging any particular answer to the charge, and I asked Mordred to apply through the usual channels for some sort of defence when he was next at prayer. He rewarded this suggestion with a wintry smile and my visitors left me just as She Who Must Be Obeyed came through on the blower to remind me that George was coming to dinner and bringing a friend, and would I buy two pounds of cooking apples at the tube station, and would I also remember not to loiter in Pommeroy's Wine Bar taking any sort of pleasure.

As I put the phone down I noticed that Miss Evelyn Skinner had filtered back into my room, apparently desiring a word with Rumpole alone. She started in a tone of pity.

'I don't think you quite understand my brother . . .'

'Oh. Miss Skinner. Yes, well . . . I never felt totally at home with vicars.' I felt some sort of apology was in order.

‘He’s like a child in many ways.’

‘The Peter Pan of the Pulpit?’

‘In a way. I’m two years older than Mordred. I’ve always had to look after him. He wouldn’t have got anywhere without me, Mr Rumpole, simply nowhere, if I hadn’t been there to deal with the Parish Council, and say the right things to the Bishop. Mordred just never thinks about himself, or what he’s doing half the time.’

‘You should have kept a better eye on him, in the sales.’

‘Of course I should! I should have been watching him like a hawk, every minute. I blame myself entirely.’

She stood there, busily blaming herself, and then her brother could be heard calling her plaintively from the passage.

‘Coming, dear. I’m coming at once,’ Evelyn said briskly, and was gone. I stood looking after her, smoking a small cigar and remembering Hilaire Belloc’s sound advice to helpless children:

‘Always keep tight hold of nurse,

For fear of finding something worse.’

George Frobisher brought a friend to dinner, and, as I had rather suspected when I got a whiff of George’s perfume in the passage, the friend was a lady, or, as I think Hilda would have preferred to call her, a woman. Now I must make it absolutely clear that this type of conduct was totally out of character in my friend George. He had an absolutely clean record so far as women were concerned. Oh I imagine he had a mother, and I have heard him occasionally mutter about sisters; but George had been a bachelor as long as I had known him, returning from our convivial claret in Pommeroy’s to the Royal Borough Hotel, Kensington, where he had a small room, reasonable *en pension* terms and coloured television after dinner in the residents’ lounge, seated in front of which device George would read his briefs, occasionally taking a furtive glance at some long-running serial of Hospital Life.

Judge of my surprise, therefore, when George turned up to dinner at Casa Rumpole with a very feminine, albeit middle-aged, lady indeed. Mrs Ida Tempest, as George introduced her, came with some

species of furry animal wreathed about her neck, whose eyes regarded me with a glassy stare, as I prepared to help Mrs Tempest partially disrobe.

The lady's own eyes were far from glassy, being twinkling, and roguish in their expression. Mrs Tempest had reddish hair (rather the colour of falsely glowing artificial coals on an electric fire) piled on her head, what I believe is known as a 'Cupid's Bow' mouth in the trade, and the sort of complexion which makes you think that if you caught its owner a brisk slap you would choke in the resulting cloud of white powder. Her skirt seemed too tight, and her heels too high, for total comfort; but it could not be denied that Mrs Ida Tempest was a cheerful and even a pleasant-looking person. George gazed at her throughout the evening with mingled admiration and pride.

It soon became apparent that in addition to his lady friend, George had brought a plastic bag from some off-licence containing a bottle of non-vintage Moët. Such things are more often than not the harbinger of alarming news, and sure enough as soon as the pud was on the table George handed me the bottle, to cope with an announcement that he and Mrs Ida Tempest were engaged to be married, clearly taking the view that this news should be a matter for congratulation.

'We wanted you to be the first to know,' George said proudly.

Hilda smiled in a way that can only be described as 'brave' and further comment was postponed by the explosion of the warm Moët. I filled everyone's glasses and Mrs Tempest reached with enthusiasm for the booze.

'Oh, I do love bubbly,' she said. 'I love the way it goes all tickly up the nose, don't you Hilda?'

'We hardly get it often enough to notice.' She Who Must Be Obeyed was in no celebratory mood that evening. I had noticed, during the feast, that she clearly was not hitting it off with Mrs Tempest. I therefore felt it incumbent on me to address the Court.

'Well then. If we're all filled up, I suppose it falls to me. Accustomed as I am to public speaking . . .' I began the speech.

'Usually on behalf of the criminal classes!' Hilda grumbled.

'Yes. Well . . . I think I know what is expected on these occasions.'

'You mean you're like the film star's fifth husband? You know what's expected of you, but you don't know how to make it new.' It appeared from her giggles and George's proud smile that Mrs Tempest had made a joke. Hilda was not amused.

'Well then!' I came to the peroration. 'Here's to the happy couple.'

'Here's to us, George!' George and Mrs Tempest clinked glasses and twinkled at each other. We all took a mouthful of warmish gas. After which Hilda courteously pushed the food in George's *fiancée's* direction.

'Would you care for a little more Charlotte Russe, Mrs Tempest?'

'Oh, Ida. Please call me Ida. Well, just a teeny-weeny scraping. I don't want to lose my sylph-like figure, do I Georgie? Otherwise you might not fancy me any more.'

'There's no danger of that.' The appalling thing was that George was looking roguish also.

'Of you not fancying me? Oh, I know . . .' La Tempest simpered.

'Of losing your figure, my dear. She's slim as a bluebell. Isn't she slim as a bluebell, Rumpole?' George turned to me for corroboration. I answered cautiously.

'I suppose that depends rather on the size of the bluebell.'

'Oh, Horace! You are terrible! Why've you been keeping this terrible man from me, George?' Mrs Tempest seemed delighted with my enigmatic reply.

'I hope we're all going to see a lot of each other after we're married.' George smiled round the table, and got a small tightening of the lips from Hilda.

'Oh yes, George. I'm sure that'll be very nice.'

The tide had gone down in Mrs Tempest's glass, and after I had topped it up she held it to the light and said admiringly. 'Lovely glasses. So tasteful. Just look at that, George. Isn't that a lovely tasteful glass?'

'They're rejects actually,' Hilda told her. 'From the Army and Navy Stores.'

'What whim of providence was it that led you across the path

of my old friend George Frobisher?’ I felt I had to keep the conversation going.

‘Mrs Tempest, that is Ida, came as a guest to the Royal Borough Hotel.’ George started to talk shyly of romance.

‘You noticed me, didn’t you dear?’ Mrs Tempest was clearly cast in the position of prompter.

‘I must admit I did.’

‘And I noticed him noticing me. You know how it is with men, don’t you, Hilda?’

‘Sometimes I wonder if Rumpole notices me at all.’ Hilda struck, I thought, an unnecessarily gloomy note.

‘Of course I notice you,’ I assured her. ‘I come home in the evenings – and there you are. I notice you all the time.’

‘As a matter of fact we first spoke in the Manageress’s Office,’ George continued with the narration, ‘where we had both gone to register a complaint, on the question of the bath water.’

‘There’s not enough hot to fill the valleys, I told her, let alone cover the hills!’ Mrs Tempest explained gleefully to Hilda, who felt, apparently, that no such explanation was necessary.

‘George agreed with me. Didn’t you, George?’

‘Shall I say, we formed an alliance?’

‘Oh, we hit it off at once. We’ve so many interests in common.’

‘Really.’ I looked at Mrs Tempest in some amazement. Apart from the basic business of keeping alive I couldn’t imagine what interests she had in common with my old friend George Frobisher. She gave me a surprising answer.

‘Ballroom dancing.’

‘Mrs Tempest,’ said George proudly, ‘that is Ida, has cups for it.’

‘George! You’re a secret ballroom dancer?’ I wanted Further and Better Particulars of this Offence.

‘We’re going for lessons together, at Miss McKay’s *École de Dance* in Rutland Gate.’

I confess I found the prospect shocking, and I said as much to George. ‘Is your life going to be devoted entirely to pleasure?’

‘Does *Horace* tango at all, Hilda?’ Mrs Tempest asked a foolish question.

‘He’s never been known to.’ Hilda sniffed slightly and I tried to make the reply lightly ironic.

‘I’m afraid crime is cutting seriously down on my time for the tango.’

‘Such a pity, dear.’ Mrs Tempest was looking at me with genuine concern. ‘You don’t know what you’re missing.’

At which point Hilda rose firmly and asked George’s intended if she wanted to powder her nose, which innocent question provoked a burst of giggles.

‘You mean, do I want to spend a penny?’

‘It is customary,’ said Hilda with some *hauteur*, ‘at this stage, to leave the gentlemen.’

‘Oh, you mean you want a hand with the washing-up,’ Mrs Tempest followed Hilda out, delivering her parting line to me.

‘Not too many naughty stories now, Horace. I don’t want you leading my Georgie astray.’ At which I swear she winked.

When we were left alone with a bottle of the Old Tawney George was still gazing foolishly after the vanishing Ida. ‘Charming,’ he said, ‘isn’t she charming?’

Now at this point I became distinctly uneasy. I had been looking at La Belle Tempest with a feeling of *déjà vu*. I felt sure that I had met her before, and not in some previous existence. And, of course, I was painfully aware of the fact that the vast majority of my social contacts are made in cells, courtrooms and other places of not too good repute. I therefore answered cautiously. ‘Your Mrs Tempest . . . seems to have a certain amount of vivacity.’

‘She’s a very able business-woman, too.’

‘Is she now?’

‘She used to run an hotel with her first husband. Highly successful business apparently. Somewhere in Kent . . .’

I frowned. The word ‘hotel’ rang a distant, but distinctly audible, bell.

‘So I thought, when we’re married, of course, she might take up a small hotel again, in the West Country perhaps.’

‘And what about you, George? Would you give up your work