SEAN O'CONNOR

HANDSOME BRUTE

THE STORY OF A LADYKILLER

WAR HERO, CONMAN, KILLER.

Handsome Brute

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The True Story of a Ladykiller

SEAN O'CONNOR

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This is an astonishing case, is it not? The probability is, of course, that Heath knows no more about the state of his mind than any of us do about our own minds. It is something that is part of his nature; it is natural; to him it would not appear extraordinary.

J. D. Casswell KC

Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?

Shakespeare, *King Lear* (III, vi)

For Jo O'Keefe
1969–2010

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PART THREE: Group Captain Rupert Robert Brook

PART FOUR: The Twisting of Another Rope

FOREWORD

> So much for Raffles. Now for a header into the cesspool.
>
> George Orwell, 'Raffles and Miss Blandish', 1944

> Heath's story is not a pretty one . . . it will be remembered as a sort of sadistic bloodbath not untypical of an age of crime where sadism and bloodbaths are, if anything, coming to be the rule rather than exceptions.
>
> Nigel Morland, *Hangman's Clutch*, 1954

With the passing of the Second World War generation into history, the story of Neville George Clevely Heath, once regarded as 'the most dangerous criminal modern Britain has known'[1] and 'the most atrocious murderer in modern times',[2] has dwindled in our collective memory in the sixty-eight years between 1946 and today.

Heath's reputation – once a byword for sadistic perversion and psychopathic violence – has not held the popular imagination as Christie's or the Moors Murderers' have. This is despite the fact that the case caused a media furore at the time, providing gruesome (and titillating) copy in newspapers dominated by the grey realities of austerity Britain: the national debt, the initiation of bread rationing and the painfully slow process of demobilization. The case was a gift for the tabloids with its sensational ingredients of aberrant sex and violent death, set in a world undergoing a process of radical change. The blond, handsome Heath, still tanned from his time abroad, was a great distraction for a nation in flux, exhausted by six years of wartime privation and looking towards an uncertain future. All the elements of the case came together to make a classic English narrative: a charming but vicious protagonist ridden with class anxiety, an ambitious detective, a national manhunt for a killer on the loose.

From a twenty-first-century perspective, the background to the murders – the pubs, bars and nightclubs of west London and the genteel hotels of south-coast seaside resorts – conjure a lost, very English world. It's the socially and sexually anxious environment of Agatha Christie and Terence Rattigan, filtered through the prism of Patrick Hamilton's drink-sodden novel, *Hangover Square*. But despite the classic and comfortable mid-twentieth-century English setting, the savagery of the crimes and Heath's at once charming, yet pathological, personality anticipate an American style of slaughter much more akin to Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* or Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*. And despite the period details – the Royal Air Force slang, the pipe clenched in the teeth and the old school tie – Heath's laconic attitude both to his crimes and to the prospect of his own extinction is redolent of the casual cruelty of contemporary murderers like John Maden, who

killed his niece Tia Rigg in Manchester in 2010, 'because I felt like it'. When he was finally arrested, Heath responded in a similarly offhand manner: 'Oh, all right.'[3]

Such was the appetite for news of the case at the time, that in the summer of 1946 when newspapers were generally restricted to four skimpy pages because of newsprint rationing, the Heath case received enormous coverage. In reporting the trial, journalists took licence to report – in surprising detail – the most graphic revelations of the murders as well as the more salacious details of Heath's sex life. The trial offered an opportunity to examine the darker avenues of sexuality in modern Britain – and this was all available over the breakfast table with the post and the toast. Heath's friends even negotiated a newspaper deal for him in order to give his exclusive side of the story.

Curiously, given the nature of his crimes, the audience for Heath's story was primarily female. Some women, it was reported, queued for fourteen hours outside the Old Bailey in the hope of getting just a glimpse of this most notorious of ladykillers. 'Rarely', noted the *People,* 'have women been so strangely fascinated by a murder trial.'[4]

For a society struggling to negotiate its place in the new world order, Heath's story articulated an alarming new post-war anxiety. With millions of soldiers, sailors and airmen returning to Britain – many of them trained killers – the Heath trial exposed the tension created by re-integrating servicemen *en masse* into the hugely changed communities and families they had left years earlier. Newspapers of the time are filled with tragic stories of servicemen returning home and killing their estranged wives, unable to settle into the brave new, post-war world. Commenting on the case of one former soldier who had done just that, which resulted in the conviction being commuted to manslaughter, Mr Justice Charles warned that 'the law of the jungle'[5] was creeping into

English courtrooms. The *News Chronicle* worried that 'it would seem from some recent murder trials that the unfaithful wife of a serviceman is an outlaw with no benefit of law whatsoever. She may be murdered with impunity.'[6]

Heath's career encapsulated the civilian population's particularly ambivalent attitude towards pilots from Bomber Command. Taking their lead from Winston Churchill, the public had lauded 'the Few', the brave boys in Spitfires who defended the nation from invasion in 1940, dog-fighting the Luftwaffe across the skies above the South Downs. But Bomber Command had flown into Europe causing devastation on an unprecedented scale, wiping out civilian and military targets alike with a seeming disregard for human life. They were at once glamorous but deadly – the creators of those iconic symbols of wartime destruction, Berlin, Hamburg and Dresden.[7] In his study of the RAF during World War II, *The Flyer*, Martin Francis observes 'a broader ambivalence among the public and the men of the RAF themselves, as to whether they were chivalric knights of the air or merciless agents of violent destruction'.[8] Neville Heath – the charmer turned killer – absolutely embodies this disorientating anxiety, and this may well be a key to the extraordinary interest the public took in the case; for Heath's story dramatized one of the unspoken fears of the age.

As early as 1947, only a year after the murders, a serial killer with remarkable similarities to Heath appears in Ken Annakin's ostensibly upbeat film, *Holiday Camp*.[9] Dennis Price plays Squadron Leader Hardwick, a suave ex-RAF pilot, charming lonely women with tales of his wartime exploits, whilst hiding his true nature as the 'mannequin murderer'. The references to Heath would have been very clear to cinema-goers at the time. The film attempts to examine the new democracy ushered in by the Welfare State. All strata of society get to take a holiday – even if that only means

a chilly week at Butlins in Bognor. But despite the optimism for the new Albion inherent in the film, it's clear that the murderous Squadron Leader Hardwick – and Heath himself – articulated the unease in British society at welcoming home a whole generation of men, many of whom had killed during the war. Having fuelled and channelled these violent instincts on behalf of the state, where were they to be directed now? And, indeed, could they be channelled at all? Or were these dark instincts to become a reality of the post-war world?[10]

The fascination with Heath continued after his trial and began to fill more than just newspaper copy. Two sensational monographs about the case were published with indelicate haste after Heath's trial, both by journalists who claimed to have known Heath personally. Gerald Byrne's *Borstal Boy: The Uncensored Life of Neville Heath* was published in 1946, printed to economy standards and bearing a suitably sombre black and white cover. Full of salacious (and often unsubstantiated) detail, it is a paperback shocker masquerading as a morality tale, 'of a man . . . who stopped at nothing to satisfy his own craving for position, money and power'.[11]

Sydney Brock's *The Life and Death of Neville Heath* followed swiftly in 1947. Though the text attempts a serious examination of Heath's life and crimes from a first-hand point of view, it has a Mills & Boon-style subtitle: *The Man No Woman Could Resist*. The cover of this railway bookstore paperback depicts a sexy young woman in a saucy short skirt – a whip to her side, hanging sinisterly in mid-air. The cover promises a 'Sensational-Sadistic-Romantic-True Story'.[12] This uncomfortable tone – exploiting the case as soft pornography – came to dominate non-fiction writing about Heath. James Hodge, who published the much-admired *Notable British Trials* series, had hesitated about covering the Heath trial at all, precisely because the facts of the case could too easily result in something of dubious value, bordering on exploitative porn.

Eventually Macdonald Critchley successfully edited the case in 1951, winning resounding praise from Hodge:

> Heath could very well have deteriorated into a wretched book in less capable hands and that is why I did not want to include it in our series before, in view of the less savoury angle some might have taken.[13]

Heath's story continued to fascinate the public and resonated throughout popular culture in the years following the trial. In 1949, the writer, Elizabeth Taylor, reinvented Heath's story as a dark romance in her novel, *A Wreath of Roses*.[14] Shortly afterwards, Patrick Hamilton wrote a trilogy of novels focusing on an amoral con man, Ralph Gorse, in his *Gorse Trilogy (*1951–55). Even if Gorse's career as a petty criminal doesn't actually lead to murder (though there's a clear sense that he's capable of it), it's apparent that in his depiction of this satanic womanizer, Hamilton had drawn heavily on details from Heath's biography, including incidences of cruelty in childhood and the manipulation of women as an art form, both with a strong undercurrent of sadomasochism.[15] All these facts were readily available in the popular press at the time of Heath's arrest and trial.

In 1954, the criminologist and novelist Nigel Morland remarked on the dramatic qualities inherent in the Heath case, 'in that it unfolds almost like a film story, with backgrounds slightly out of focus'.[16] It's no surprise then that Alfred Hitchcock, renowned especially in his later works for his explorations of sex and psychopathy – particularly after the success of *Psycho* in 1960 – was drawn to Heath's personality and spent several years developing a film inspired by the events of the case. The script, originally written by Benn Levy, was called *Frenzy* (latterly *Kaleidoscope*).[17] By 1967 Hitchcock was already making camera tests for the film and had shot an hour

of silent footage. This was to be Hitchcock as he'd never been seen before – informed by the European New Wave with a particular emphasis on realism, graphic sex and violence.[18] But this new Hitch proved too radical for the studio executives at MCA. They rejected the script and the Heath project was shelved. Howard Fast, who also worked on the script, claimed that the studio told Hitchcock that they'd never allow him to shoot it as 'his pictures were known for elegant villains and here was an impossibly ugly one'.[19] The title was eventually recycled for Hitchcock's more accessible 1971 British comeback featuring Barry Foster as Rusk, the 'necktie murderer'.[20] But the essence of the film *Frenzy* – a charming but ultimately terrifying sex killer – shares much in common with the character of Heath, Rusk's fetish for neckties echoing Heath's widely reported fetish for handkerchiefs.

Though the facts of the case created an international media sensation, reported in newspapers and magazines across the globe, the trial was very English in tone; low-key and devoid of histrionics. The dramatic focus of the three-day hearing was a debate about Heath's sanity. This was assessed by a statute over 100 years old – the M'Naghten Rules of 1843 – which posed the question: 'Did the Defendant know what he was doing – and, if so, did he know what he was doing was wrong?' This made no concessions for the developments in psychology and psychiatry since the turn of the twentieth century. The plea of diminished responsibility was not to reach the British statute books for another decade with the passing of the Homicide Act in 1957. This was to state that:

> Where a person kills or is party to a killing of another, he shall not be convicted of murder if he was suffering from such abnormality of mind . . . as substantially impaired his mental responsibility for his acts and omissions in doing or being a party to the killing.[21]

No such plea was available to Heath's defence in 1946.

Key witnesses, who may have been able to offer crucial evidence in relation to Heath's past behaviour, his service career and his psychological state in the months leading up to the murders, were never called to the trial. With the lack of such evidence the issue of Heath's sanity (or insanity) was never fully debated. Beyond the categorization of Heath as a malevolent killer and sexual sadist, there was little curiosity, from either the prosecution or the defence, in examining Heath's character or background. Heath didn't deny committing the murders once he'd been arrested – consequently, there was no attempt at the trial to try and explain them. What provoked Heath to do what he did remains a mystery. Though he later gave a version of events to the press, this may have been motivated by his wish to leave money to his family and pay off his debts, rather than any desire to leave behind his version of the 'Truth'. And, with regard to *any* story Heath told, it's important to bear in mind that he was a sophisticated and practised liar, having talked his way into and out of dramatic situations since his schooldays.

In his essay, *Decline of the English Murder*, published in the same year as the trial, George Orwell observed a sea change in the culture of murder in Britain and firmly pointed to the Second World War as the tipping point.[22] He lamented the passing of the 'Elizabethan age' of English murder which, he suggested, spanned from 1850 to 1925 and included classic cases like Crippen, Seddon, Mrs Maybrick, Thompson and Bywaters – all domestic crimes motivated by money, sex or respectability. He contrasted these with the 'Cleft Chin Murder' of 1944, committed by Elizabeth Marina Jones and Karl Hulten, a meaningless killing set against 'the anonymous life of dance-halls and the false values of the American film'. In effect, he suggested that the average reader of the *News of the World* or the *Sunday Pictorial*[23] enjoyed the brutality of this

new American style of murder because, as a culture, Britain had been brutalized by the effects of the war.

Orwell had first outlined this theory in 'Raffles and Miss Blandish', comparing the author E. W. Hornung's popular character, Raffles – the gentleman thief – with James Hadley Chase's hard-boiled American tale *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, a novel of murder, torture, sadistic violence and rape. Significantly this became one of the most popular novels of the war years and Orwell was clear in what he felt lay at the heart of its huge success – it articulated the sublimated anxieties of the age:

> In his imagined world of gangsters Chase is presenting, as it were, a distilled version of the modern political scene, in which such things as mass bombing of civilians, the use of hostages, torture to obtain confessions, secret prisons, execution without trial, floggings with rubber truncheons, drownings in cess-pools, systematic falsification of records and statistics, treachery, bribery, and quislingism are normal and morally neutral, even admirable when they are done in a large and bold way. *The average man is not directly interested in politics, and when he reads, he wants the current struggles of the world to be translated into a simple story about individuals* [my italics].[24]

This may well be another reason why Heath's story touched such a popular nerve at the time, articulating as it did a brutal and violent strain in modern culture, unnervingly close to the surface, through the story of a once-heroic individual turned bad.

For the first time, this book examines evidence and witness statements that have been held in previously restricted files from the Home Office and the Metropolitan Police. Some evidence relating to third parties remains restricted in the National Archives until 2045 as do the scene of crime and post-mortem photographs, which were described at the time

as 'grotesque'. The post-mortem reports themselves are sufficiently graphic to make it clear the appalling nature of these images.

My intention is to examine the tragic events of 1946 in the fuller context of what we now know about the period and the case, as well as examining issues unexplored at the time concerning Heath's life leading up to the killings, which might have some bearing on his subsequent actions. What was the combination of circumstances that brought the crisis in Heath's life to a head that summer? And how far is Heath's case emblematic or indeed symptomatic of the age in which he lived? For in a country battered and exhausted by six years of war, a culture in a moment of change, and the sense of a new morality around the corner, Heath was regarded as 'the incarnation of war-time and post-war vices'.[25]

Throughout 1946, the major international news stories were the increasing violence in Palestine and the trials of the Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg. With the revelation of the horrors of the death camps, there's a sense that mankind was capable of a depth of cruelty, a lack of humanity barely imaginable in the relative innocence of the pre-war period. Certainly with Gordon Cummins, the 'blackout ripper', who mutilated the sexual organs of his victims with a can-opener, followed soon after by Heath, then the acid-bath murderer Haigh and the necrophiliac Christie, there does seem a real sense of extremity – a ferocity and violence extremely rare in British crime since the Whitechapel murders at the end of the nineteenth century.

Early in the investigation, Detective Superintendent Lovell of the Dorset Constabulary first articulated the intriguing power of Heath's complex nature: 'Certainly his personality is an extremely puzzling one, and capable of more than one single interpretation.'[26] Heath's solicitor, Isaac Near, later commented that 'whatever the facts of the case, Heath had

certainly a remarkable personality – a personality that made one like him'.[27] As well as a startling lack of remorse, the persona Heath reveals in his letters from prison show real tenderness and self-awareness. He was capable of inspiring genuine affection in many of the people he knew, yet it's impossible not to be repelled by the atrocities he committed. What continues to fascinate is his elusive, contradictory character. How do we reconcile the suburban confidence trickster, the charismatic and articulate ladies' man with the savage and pitiless murderer who had the capacity not just to kill, but to violate the bodies of his victims with such ferocity that war-hardened police officers vomited on seeing them?

At times it's uncomfortable to examine the records of this case and find the lives of both killer and his victims described in such forensic detail, a knowledge denied to even their closest friends and family; not just a list of dates and places, but the most intimate details of their lives – the money they had (or more often didn't have), the dates of their menstrual cycle, their sexual predilections, their innermost secrets. But it's this sometimes invasive detail that diminishes the passage of time and brings home the fact that they may not be 'fools in old-style hats and coats' at all; that perhaps we share more with the wartime generation than we thought, and their ambitions and anxieties – despite the years between us – remain constant and universal, urgent and real.

William Bixley served for fifty years in Court No. 1 as supervising officer at the Old Bailey. He had held a uniquely privileged position, attendant at the most distressing and dramatic of trials. Yet, in his memoir of 1957, Bixley reflected that, of all the trials he had witnessed throughout his half-century of service, Heath's case was 'the most upsetting'.

> The reason for the feeling of revulsion and dread which, I think, permeated the minds of everyone in that Court was

> that Heath seemed ostensibly so normal, and one had deep forebodings that only by a hair's breadth did other seemingly decent and pleasant young men escape from the awful sexual sadism which, at times, makes man lower than any animal that walks or crawls on the face of the earth.[28]

It's that hair's breadth that separates us from Heath that continues to chill us, too. How could this 'seemingly decent and pleasant' young man also be capable of some of the most brutal acts in British criminal history?

CHARACTERS

21 MERTON HALL ROAD, WIMBLEDON

Neville George Clevely Heath, 29	*ex-RAF pilot*
William Heath, 56	*his father*
Bessie Heath, 55	*his mother*
Michael (Mick) Heath, 17	*his brother*

'STRATHMORE', WARREN ROAD, WORTHING

Yvonne Marie Symonds, 21	*ex-WRNS*
Major John Charters Symonds, 55	*her father*
Gertrude Symonds	*her mother*

24 OAKHOLME ROAD, SHEFFIELD

Margery Aimee Brownell Gardner, 32	*artist*
Peter Gardner, 32	*her husband*
Melody Gardner, 2	*her daughter*
Elizabeth Wheat, 67	*her mother*
Gilbert Wheat, 30	*her brother, a schoolteacher*
Ralph Macro Wilson, 43	*family solicitor*

19 WOODHALL DRIVE, PINNER

Doreen Margaret Marshall, 21	*ex-WRNS*
Charles Marshall, 59	*her father*
Grace Marshall, 53	*her mother*
Joan Grace Cruickshanks, 25	*her married sister*

LONDON

Strand Palace Hotel	
Leonard William Luff, 58	*assistant manager*
Thomas Paul, 59	*head porter*
Pauline Miriam Brees, 21	*model*
Pembridge Court Hotel	
Elizabeth Wyatt, 65	*manageress*
Alice Wyatt, 40	*her daughter-in-law*
Rhoda Spooner, 26	*waitress*
Barbara Osborne, 32	*chambermaid*
Panama Club	
Solomon Josephs, 56	*receptionist*
Harold Harter, 40	*taxi driver*
Associates of Neville Heath	
Leslie Terry, 43	*restaurant owner*
Harry Ashbrook, 38	*journalist*
Ralph Fisher	*commercial pilot*
Zita Williams, 23	*shorthand typist*
Jill Harris, 20	*shorthand typist*
William Spurrett Fielding-Johnson, 54	*squadron leader, RAF*
Associates of Margery Gardner	
Peter Tilley Bailey, 29	*gentleman thief*
Trevethan Frampton, 26	*student*
Iris Humphrey, 29	*civil servant*
John Le Mee Power, 33	*building firm accountant*
Joyce Frost, 33	*friend of Margery Gardner*

Metropolitan Police	
Reginald Spooner, 43	*divisional detective inspector*
Shelley Symes, 41	*detective inspector*
Thomas Barratt, 48	*superintendent, Scotland Yard*

JOHANNESBURG

Elizabeth Armstrong, 26	*Armstrong's wife*
Robert Michael Armstrong, 2	*their son*
Moira Lister, 23	*actress*

BOURNEMOUTH

Tollard Royal Hotel	
Ivor Relf, 35	*manager*
Arthur White, 38	*head night porter*
Frederick Charles Wilkinson, 33	*night porter*
Alice Hemmingway, 47	*chambermaid*
Peter Rylatt, 31	*demobbed lawyer*
Gladys Davy Phillips, 62	*married woman*
Winifred Parfitt, 40	*married woman*
Heinz Abisch, 30	*designer, wire company*
Peggy Waring, 37	*student*

Bournemouth Police	
George Gates, 45	*detective inspector*
George Suter, 40	*detective constable*
Leslie Johnson, 38	*detective sergeant*
Francis Bishop, 46	*detective sergeant, Dorset*

THE OLD BAILEY

Isaac Elliston Near, 45	*Heath's solicitor*
Mr Justice Morris, 50	*judge*
Anthony Hawke, 51	*counsel for the Crown*
J. D. Casswell, KC, 60	*counsel for the defence*
Dr Keith Simpson, 39	*pathologist*
Dr Crichton McGaffey,43	*pathologist*
Dr Hugh Grierson, 60	*psychiatrist*
Dr William Hubert, 42	*psychiatrist*
Dr Hubert Young, 57	*psychiatrist*

PROLOGUE
Mrs Brees

23 FEBRUARY 1946

In the early hours of Saturday morning on 23 February 1946, a guest on the fourth floor of the Strand Palace Hotel was disturbed by violent noises from the room directly above. Something fell on the floor, a woman screamed for help. The guest reported the commotion to the head porter, Thomas Paul. Paul was accustomed to the realities of hotel life during wartime and was used to turning a blind eye to the excesses of alcohol and sex, so he discreetly went up to the fifth floor to see if there was a problem. When he got to Room 506, he listened at the locked door and heard a woman screaming from inside.

'Stop! Stop! For God's sake, stop!'

Concerned by the severity of her cries, Paul ran down the stairs to get his colleague, Leonard William Luff, the assistant manager.[1]

The Strand Palace was (and remains) a large building on the north side of the Strand, parallel to the Thames. Its exterior was built in the grand Empire style in 1909, but the hotel had been expanded and refurbished during the 1920s and by the Second World War boasted 980 bedrooms. The famous foyer of the hotel was remodelled in 1930. Claridges, the Savoy and the newly constructed Dorchester all had sumptuous Art Deco foyers, but Oliver P. Bernard's designs for the Strand Palace had made his creation one of the most celebrated hotel interiors in London.[2] The foyer combined traditional and contemporary marbles and made innovative use of glass and lighting. The walls were clad in pink marble and the floor with limestone. The balustrades, columns and door surrounds were made of mirror, chromed steel and translucent moulded glass. The foyer became regarded as an iconic Art Deco masterpiece and, indeed, is now preserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum after its removal from the hotel in 1969. Back in 1946, the hotel seemed to represent the epitome of pre-war elegance, bringing a touch of Hollywood glamour to war-torn London.[3]

Conveniently located amongst the pubs, bars, nightclubs and restaurants of London's West End, the Strand Palace had been popular with American forces during the war and had only recently been decommissioned as an official rest and recuperation residence for US servicemen. Now, with thousands of American troops awaiting shipment back home and huge numbers of British officers and service personnel newly repatriated to the UK, London was teeming with servicemen and the hotel was fully booked.

Ten months earlier, on VE Day, nearly 5 million Britons had been in uniform across the globe. The process of repatriation and demobilization was to take months, and in some cases, even years.[4] The large West End hotels provided discreet but accessible havens of transition between the past

dangers and thrills of service life and the post-war world of spouses, families and responsibility. For many, such hotels represented the last opportunity for illicit liaisons, as well as offering the possibility of sensual indulgence amongst the legion of prostitutes in central London – a profession that had boomed during the war years.

The occupant of Room 506 at the Strand Palace was known to be Captain James Robert Cadogan Armstrong of the South African Air Force. Armstrong had checked into the Strand Palace on the previous Saturday, 16 February. On his uniform he wore the ribbons of the Africa Star and the DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross). He seemed to be a regular hero.

In response to the woman's screams, Thomas Paul and Leonard Luff headed upstairs to deal with the matter. When Luff opened the door with his pass-key, the two men were met by a shocking sight; a young woman lay face down on the bed, stripped naked and rendered helpless, with her hands tied behind her back. Standing over her, also naked, was Armstrong – tall, tanned, blue-eyed and handsome.[5] The woman twisted her face to the intruders, exclaiming, 'Thank God you came in.'

Armstrong turned to Paul and Luff in a fury.[6]

'What the hell are you doing, breaking in here?'

Mr Luff explained who they were, but Armstrong made no answer. Luff asked what had been going on, but the girl asked to be untied first. Luff told Armstrong to do so and the girl was freed. He then adopted a nonchalant attitude and tried to bluster the matter out, demanding what right the staff had to enter his room, but when Luff mentioned that he would call the police, Armstrong became more reasonable.

Luff asked the woman, Pauline Brees, if she knew the man and she said she did. She claimed that he had knocked her out and then undressed her. She turned to Armstrong and asked

if he had raped her. This question he avoided at first, but finally denied. Asked by Luff if they should call the police, Pauline insisted that they shouldn't. She just wanted to leave the hotel and didn't want any publicity.

Despite Pauline's story, Luff didn't believe her. There were no marks of violence on her, her clothing was on a chair by the bed – undamaged – and there were no signs of a struggle having taken place. Luff thought that Pauline 'looked to me like a prostitute'.[7] He told Pauline and Armstrong to collect their things and leave. They got dressed and Armstrong took Pauline home in a taxi to her lodgings. He then checked out of the hotel himself that Sunday morning. Though the incident had raised alarm, it was regarded as embarrassing rather than serious.

Pauline, who had been widowed just six months earlier, had been introduced to Armstrong about a week before by a mutual friend at Oddenino's – a restaurant in Regent Street much frequented by RAF officers. When they met, Armstrong was wearing the khaki uniform of a lieutenant colonel in the South African Air Force. On the following Wednesday (20 February), Armstrong telephoned Pauline at her home in Maida Vale and invited her to lunch the next day. So, on Thursday, they lunched together at the Berkeley Restaurant in Knightsbridge. Afterwards they parted company in good spirits.[8]

On Friday, Pauline and Armstrong met again by appointment at Oddenino's and from there went to the Berkeley again for a drink. This initiated something of an all-day pub-crawl that took them from the Falstaff in Fleet Street where they had lunch and then to Shepherd's pub in Shepherd Market followed by the Brevet Club in Mayfair, which were both popular drinking venues with the Royal Air Force. They left the Brevet Club at about 10 p.m. as the club had run out of beer. This was a common occurrence throughout London at the time as publicans dealt with reduced supplies

of beer as well as the increased demand for it since the outbreak of war.

Armstrong suggested that they go back to his room for a nightcap. Pauline agreed to accompany him to the Strand Palace where she knew he was staying but told him that she had to be home by 11.30 p.m. as she had an awkward landlady. The pair went up to the fifth floor to a double room overlooking the Strand and opposite the Art Deco entrance to the Savoy Hotel and the Savoy Theatre.[9]

In Room 506, Pauline sat on the bed while Armstrong poured himself a drink. Pauline refused to join him as she didn't like whisky. He went over to the bed and kissed her. As he became more persistent, Pauline told him that she had to be going.

'Oh no, you're not,' said Armstrong. 'You're staying the night with me.'[10]

At this point, events took a darker turn. Pauline got up, telling him not to be ridiculous as she headed for the door. But he had locked it. Grabbing her, he seized her arm and twisted it behind her back. Though she realized that she was in some danger, she claimed she didn't scream because she didn't want to embarrass him by getting him turned out of the hotel.

'Why are you doing this?' she asked him.

'I hate women,' said Armstrong.

He pulled off her coat and ordered her to strip. When she refused, they started to struggle. At 5 feet 11 inches, powerfully built and an accomplished rugby player, Armstrong threw her against the wall with such force that she lost consciousness. When she came to, Pauline realized that she had been stripped naked. Half conscious, she rushed for the door, but Armstrong grabbed her again.

'Oh, no you don't,' he said. 'We'll soon fix this.'

He took a handkerchief and tied her hands behind her

back, pushing her on to the bed. He then took off his own clothes. At this point, Pauline claimed that she didn't scream because she was 'only half conscious and paralysed with fright'. Armstrong then tried to turn her over, so that her face was in the pillow. But Pauline couldn't breathe and struggled to free herself again. He now threatened her.

'I'll make you do exactly what I want you to do.'

Forcing himself on to her prostrate body, he attempted to rape her 'in an un-natural way' but she struggled so intensely that they fell off the bed. He then put his hands around her throat. Now terrified for her life, Pauline screamed.

'Stop! Stop! For God's sake. Stop!'

Armstrong punched Pauline in the face with his fist, rendering her unconscious again. The next thing she was aware of was the arrival in the room of the assistant manager and the head porter. 'I was lying on the bed but I don't know how I got there,' she said later. Mr Luff told Armstrong and Pauline to get out, but he was, she remembered, 'quite nice to [her]'.

Some months later, it was established that James Robert Cadogan Armstrong was actually Neville George Clevely Heath, by then standing trial for murder. Reginald Spooner of the Metropolitan Police questioned Pauline Brees and was clear in his interpretation of the incident at the Strand Palace Hotel; she did not want to prosecute Heath because she admitted she had gone knowingly with him to the bedroom to be stripped and beaten.

The matter was forgotten, at least for several months. It seemed to be an illicit liaison, a sexual adventure that had got out of hand – typical in this period of transition. Many people were tasting their last moments of freedom before settling down to post-war life. Maybe too much alcohol was consumed in the various pubs, clubs and restaurants that the couple had visited; both Heath and Pauline had drunk

consistently throughout their time together. Perhaps both parties misinterpreted the desires of the other? Or Pauline hadn't quite anticipated the intensity of 'Armstrong's' intentions? But this incident – referred to only obliquely as 'that incident at the London hotel' or 'a certain case not mentioned here'[11] – was to take on a much darker significance at Heath's trial. Had Pauline Brees chosen to prosecute Heath at the time, or had the hotel staff alerted the police to his behaviour, the whole series of tragic events that followed over the next six months might well have been prevented.

As it stood, by the end of the year, three young people would be dead, their families devastated and the nation appalled by the events of the summer of 1946.