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Gerald Seymour exploded onto the literary scene with the massive best-seller **HARRY'S GAME**. He has been a full-time writer since 1975, and six of his novels have been filmed for television in the UK and US. *Vagabond* is his thirty-first novel.

Also by Gerald Seymour

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VAGABOND

Gerald Seymour

H
HODDER

I

They'd killed him – not shot or strangled him, but when they'd sent him up the road.

The hut in which they had taken refuge from the weather was part collapsed. Three of the walls still stood and half of the tin roofing was there, but storms had taken down the rest; the floor creaked when any of them moved. Manure and a carpet of damp straw lay over the debris, and the place stank of cattle, and of the cigarettes smoked incessantly by the police who guarded them.

It was clear to Hugo Woolmer that he might as well have fired the bullet himself. His partner in the agent's death was Gaby Davies. Hugo was three years older, at a higher grade in the Service, so had nominal control of the operation. What else might he have done? He could have refused permission for the agent to drive off into the fog that hid the road that snaked up towards the mountain. He might have insisted that he would not allow his agent to be at the beck and call of those who had called him and go to them, without back-up, in the hire car.

The agent had worn no wire under his vest and no microphone in his watch. No bug had been fastened to the small car he had collected at the airport. It had been thought that a wire, a microphone, or a bug was too simple for 'them' to locate.

The agent had flown from London, had stayed the night in a modern hotel within a stone's throw of the police barracks. They had demanded a meeting with the agent. Two alternatives had faced Hugo Woolmer: he could allow his man to drive into the cloud and the labyrinth of narrow roads and farm tracks, which dictated vehicle pursuit was impossible, or he could accept that an agent who had worked with the Service for almost five and a

half years should now be reined in, the contact with 'them' lost. The chance of replacing the agent was minimal. It had been his decision to make, and Gaby Davies's voice had been insistent that morning in the hotel when visibility across the car park was negligible.

At the heart of the decision was the agent's personal safety. He would be beyond reach, with no panic button because it was likely that he would be subjected to a search with detectors. To let him go forward, or not? A crushing weight had burdened Hugo Woolmer.

He was crouched against one of the hut's surviving walls. The wind came through the trees, whipping twigs against them. He sat on his heels. His head was down on his chest.

She had said, 'Of course he'll do the meeting with them. It's what we brought him over for. It's a tough old world out there. You should know that and so should he. If he's blown his cover, then that's a sound reason for them to summon him to their territory. Or maybe they have a different role for him and want to talk it through. He put himself into this situation. He should have known things might get tricky before he associated with them. To cancel his meeting with them and break the link would mean that any trust they had in him is gone. And they won't leave it at that. He'd be walking dead. He does the meeting, Hugo. You can't call MB and tell him you've lost your nerve. For God's sake!'

His chin was hard against the zip of his anorak. His arms encircled his shins. His fingers were locked together, and knuckles white, and he had begun to shake.

The hire car from the airport would have been driven by one of them into a farm gateway and torched. He wouldn't have seen the car burning. They would have picked him up and slipped him into the back of a van without windows. They might have trussed him, even hooded him, and gone to one of the little homes on the mountain. There, he would be sat on a hard chair and slapped around a bit, if they suspected anything. One would be the smooth talker and would tell the agent that confession would save his life. Or maybe he'd swear at him, put a lighted cigarette close to his eyes and tell him how bad the pain would be . . .

He heard whimpering and realised it was his. He had become fond of the agent, and reckoned Gaby Davies – for all her bluster about people making their own beds and having to lie on them – liked him too. He was one of those people who seemed to make the sun shine a little brighter, and had an infectious chuckle. He could have cancelled the business, and had not.

Hugo Woolmer was protected: he and Gaby Davies had four taciturn police watching their backs, with Heckler & Koch rifles. Their faces showed disapproval of the two young 'blow-ins' from the mainland: they reckoned that Service people from across the water were clever and had good kit but a negligible understanding of problems in the Province. The agent was without protection.

If 'they' broke him, which Hugo Woolmer believed was almost certain, they would forget about beating him and burning him with cigarettes. They would sit him at a table, give him pencil and paper and instruct him to write the names of his contacts, handler and the length of his association with the Service. Then they would extricate from him every detail on the extent of his betrayal. He'd be told that if he wrote it all down he would be driven back down the hill to pick up his hire car and drive away. That was what they would tell him, and it would be lies. Hugo Woolmer knew, of course, of the Second World War saboteurs and wireless operators who had been rounded up in the occupied territories, tortured and never broke: he didn't understand how that was possible. He had heard it said, by a Service veteran, that raw volunteers in the Organisation sometimes fought among each other for the privilege of killing an agent of the British occupation. He knew the agent's wife and daughter by sight. He could have stopped him going into the fog.

The police watched him, impassive. He wouldn't have said that Gaby Davies was pretty. From the corner of his eye, Hugo Woolmer could see her face. She was small and stocky, with short dark hair. She wore walking boots, faded jeans, a couple of T-shirts and a heavy anorak. She smoked with the police – kept pace with them. Her rucksack rested against her legs and held sandwiches, a flask of coffee, the communications equipment they'd use at the end of the day and her Glock pistol. Hugo was not armed. They

had a correct relationship but when any issue needed closure she had the last word at the discussion stage, and he would make the decision. The agent had gone forward.

Rooks shrieked in the trees and the wind sang in the branches above them. His shoulders shook and tears came.

He was watched with a hawk's intensity.

It was Dermot and Dymphna Fahy's home. Daft, the pair of them. They had been sent in their car to the town with a twenty-pound note, which would last them the morning as they pushed a trolley up the aisles of the Spar, then the pound shop. They'd have enough left, maybe, after their shopping for a glass of Guinness each in O'Brien's. The bungalow was a good place, quiet, not overlooked by neighbours, the Fahys had no record with the police so there wouldn't be surveillance. The front garden was a wilderness – there was an old pram in it, and a bicycle frame; the paintwork on the window frames was flaking and the door knocker was askew. Nothing happened at that bungalow so it was the right place for him to have been brought to. There was a dog, a collie-cross, but the Fahy woman had shut it in the shed. It had barked when they'd arrived, but was quiet now.

He was watched closely and they looked for the signs – sweat on the neck and forehead, nervous blinking . . . Malachy stood beside Brendan Murphy and the two filled the doorway into the back bedroom. There was no bed – it had gone with the Fahys' boy to a room he rented in Lurgan town. A dressing-table with a mirror, cracked on the left side, was covered with old newspapers and some plastic bags from the Spar, and there was a pile of brown envelopes, unopened. Across them a cable, plugged to a wall socket, led to a well-used electric drill – not for heavy use, but big enough to make a hole in a wall for a Rawlplug or to damage a man's kneecap. Also under the cable there was a length of towel, folded into a strip, and a coil of baling twine from a farmer's yard. The man had his back to the dressing-table but would have seen what was on it, as was intended, when they'd led him in. He was sitting on a straight-backed wooden chair and kept his knees

together – protection of sorts. He didn't make eye contact. Interesting that he hadn't complained at being bundled into the back of a van, or when he had been blindfolded at the end of the journey, or when he had stubbed his toe on a step between the collapsed gate and the front door. The curtain was drawn. He wouldn't know where he was. It was good that he didn't show fear: either he didn't feel it or he hid it well.

Brennie asked Malachy, 'Are you liking him or not liking him?'

A murmured response: 'We'd be putting a lot in his hands – maybe too much? I don't know.'

'And big money.' Brennie grimaced. He was the father figure. Brennie Murphy's reputation was different from Malachy's. He wasn't a soldier or a marksman; he was no good with a soldering iron and a circuit board. He seemed prematurely aged – his wrinkled, colourless skin and straggling hair gave the impression that he was older than the sixty-one from his birth certificate. He had judgement. From his teenage years, the younger man had listened to what Brennie Murphy said and hadn't contradicted his advice. If the man was a police or Five spy and a plant, Brennie Murphy would smell him. His nose seemed to slant towards the left side of his mouth – the result of a baton blow struck by a screw in the Maze during a protest. If Brennie reckoned he'd smelt a spy, the man wouldn't be alive in the morning. They needed this man and his contacts, but it was high risk. They hadn't seen him before; others had dealt with him, but only for cigarettes. An organisation resurrecting a war couldn't survive on cigarettes: it needed weapons. It was 'big money'. It would clear out bank accounts and strip away the limited funds that supported the dependants of the men in HMP Maghaberry. Brennie rolled a wooden toothpick between his teeth. 'He's not messed himself.'

The man gazed at the floor. His breathing was regular – he wasn't panting with panic. He hadn't demanded to know why he was there. He was sort of docile, which confused Malachy. He thought Brennie Murphy hadn't yet read the man – they knew his history, his address, his family, his circumstances. The link with the cigarette trade had run for years and the contacts were in the

Inchicore district of Dublin, across the border. They didn't know him, nor he them. What sort of Englishman would offer to facilitate, for a fee, the purchase of weapons for their organisation? He hadn't launched it, but had been propositioned by the cigarette people: he hadn't refused. Brennie Murphy wouldn't waste time looking for the answer. Malachy watched. He was the soldier, the marksman, and understood how to build a mercury tilt switch into a device, but he didn't have the nose for a spy.

'Would you stand up.'

He did.

'Would you take off your clothes.'

Brennie Murphy's voice was quiet, not aggressive, but it would have been a brave man who refused. The fingers were clumsy and the shirt buttons, the belt buckle and the shoe laces were awkward. If he was wearing a wire or his wrist watch was bugged, this was crisis time. Two at the door, two more closer to him, and one held the kit: it was the size of a cordless phone and was switched on. The shirt came off, the shoes, socks, trousers and vest. He paused, looked questioningly at Brennie Murphy. His underpants? Malachy understood. It wasn't necessary for the man to strip stark bollock naked. The detector could operate easily enough through flimsy cotton, but . . .

'Take them down.'

It was about domination. It wasn't like when he'd played Gaelic football and they were in the showers with nothing on: this man wasn't in their team. He was a stranger, and to be naked would humiliate him – the intention. The man was forty-one, they'd been told his age, and seemed in poor condition. He had a little spare flesh at his waist and his shoulders slumped. The detector was over his clothes and shoes, then his body, but the tone didn't alter. The little bleep was the only sound in the room, other than the wheeze of Brennie Murphy's breathing. It was switched off. Would intelligence people have allowed an agent to go forward without communications? They might have because they were hard, cold bastards, and Malachy knew it. He saw Brennie's head turn a little: his eyes were on the drill on the dressing-table and he nodded.

It was switched on.

It was carried round the chair and held in front of the man's stomach. Not a clean sound but searing, as if it needed fresh oil. The drill head, a blur of movement, was no more than a foot from his flesh. Malachy watched: the penis had shrivelled, the knees were closer and the hands were clasped. The eyes stared at the drill, but the man didn't flinch.

Brennie said, like it was conversation, 'If I get a bad smell about you, it goes into you. If I reckon you're a tout, it's the drill in you. At the first touch of it you'll be blathering to me the names of your handlers and where they are down the road. You'll have an hour to live, but you'll be telling me about your handlers or it comes into you again. You'll get the drill every time your tongue stops flapping. You with me?'

The man nodded.

'And if I'm liking what you say, you get to have your trousers. If I'm not liking it you get the drill and the cigarettes. . . . It stinks when skin melts from a cigarette burn. Why'll you do this?'

The man bent and reached for his clothes. 'Did I get it wrong? Seems I did. I thought you were in the market for assaults, launchers, commercial bang stuff and perhaps some mortars. If you want to go through this charade with me, forget the goodies.'

The man gazed into Brennie Murphy's face. Then he put on his vest, then his underpants, and picked up his shirt.

Brennie Murphy hissed, 'Don't get cheeky with me—'

'I'm talking of assault rifles, launchers, grenades, mortars, military explosive, and the groundwork's done.'

Malachy saw the flick of the fingers. Brennie Murphy's order was obeyed. The drill whined close to the man's ear. He kept his expression impassive. He didn't know of any stranger who had given lip to Brennie Murphy without a self-loading rifle in his hand and a section of paratroopers or Special Task Force police. The man didn't bother to button his shirt and slid into his shoes. He folded his arms across his chest. Time to talk business or to call it off.

Brennie Murphy took a step sideways, grasped the cable and

yanked it from the wall. The drill was off. 'Why would you do this for us?'

'There's a recession on where I live, and I've a family to keep. You pay me. Good enough? I need the money.'

His backside was lower, his shoulders had subsided further and he pulled his knees closer to his chest. He was still whimpering.

She was ashamed to be with him. Hugo Woolmer was superior to Gaby Davies in the Service hierarchy, and had outperformed her with a first-class honours degree at an Oxford college while she had a lower second from a provincial university. His family had connections and she was a 'token' from a sink school in the north-east. If it would have silenced him, she would have kicked him, hard, in the groin. When they were back at Toad Hall, as the local guys in Belfast called Thames House, home of the Service, she'd knife him. It was, she accepted, a unique moment for her: she had never before seen a man disintegrate in nervous collapse.

'We've killed him. He trusted us.'

She'd make certain he was dead in the water as far as his future went with the Service.

'He was paid peanuts, manipulated and compromised, and we betrayed him.'

She'd go down in a week's time, two maybe, and watch when he went through the barriers at the main entrance for the last time. His ID would be shredded.

'It should never have been allowed and we'll carry the burden of it to our graves.'

She liked the man who had driven away – without cover or back-up – into the cloud that had grounded the surveillance helicopters. He made her laugh. There was mischief in his humour and he was frank about the bullshit he peddled in his business dealings. Gaby Davies liked him – but he was an agent, a Joe. It wasn't for her or Hugo to call him off when a meeting was arranged. She'd thought him more remote the last week, vaguer in spitting out the detail of what these people wanted of him but . . . She thought, looking out of the hut and through the trees, that the

rain had eased. There might even be a hint of sunshine in the west.

'They'll torture him, he'll talk, and then they'll kill him. I'll never forgive myself.'

Her phone stayed silent. She assumed her agent's would have been left switched off in the car. He would have been taken in one of their vehicles to the meeting place. If they had called him over it was not to discuss the next consignment of cigarettes shipped out of a Spanish or North African port and brought ashore on the wild south-west coast of Ireland. Gaby Davies had gone through in her mind, many times, every contact with her man to explore the chance of a show-out. She couldn't see the danger moment when suspicion might have arisen. Of course they couldn't have called him off.

The crying was louder.

A policeman spoke, a soft voice, faintly mocking: 'Makes a habit of it, does he?'

She said, brittle, 'It's brightening in the west. That was what my mum used to say when we were kids on the beach at Blyth and it rained. It always did the week we had the caravan – brighter in the west . . . but it was the bloody east coast.'

He was a big man, overweight, and his vest bulged. He held his weapon as though it were part of him – he most likely slept with it, was fonder of it than he was of his wife. The weapon entitled him to sneer. 'Not what you'd call suited to the work.'

'We'll save the inquest for later.' It was her way of telling him, a uniformed oaf, that it was none of his effing business how Hugo Woolmer behaved. 'Could be OK here by late morning.'

'And he's not suited for the place, miss . . . Mind if I say something?'

'If it's about the weather.'

The cloud remained locked on the mountain's slopes, still dense, but she could see a little gold on the summit ridge – watery sunshine on dead bracken.

'You've not been here before, miss. It's about as bad a part of the Province as you'll find, plenty of wicked wee boys here. There's communities that have bought into what we laughingly call the

'peace process', and there's communities that haven't. They keep going at it in these parts. It's tribal and the families don't know another life. Me, going off into that mist on my own, no panic kit, no one listening and watching out for me, I'd want to be in a main battle tank, hatches down. This part of the Province, they've not given up on the war.'

'I've had that briefing, thank you.'

'It's a hard place, the hardest. Lawless now and always has been . . . You were saying, miss, that the weather's clearing. You'll see the high point – that's Shane Bearnagh's Seat, a fine vantage-point on a better day. I'm talking of more than three hundred years ago and Bearnagh was what we call a 'rapparee', a thief, smuggler and killer. Before the military got him, he bedded the wife of a British officer while they were all out hunting him. It's a nasty place, miss, and has been for centuries. Has your man strong nerves?'

'I don't know.'

'Pity you didn't find that out before he went up there.'

'Have you got a cigarette?' He gave her one. 'Thanks.' Another man passed her a flask of coffee. She detected a trace of brandy in it. The cigarette and the drink warmed her. As an officer in the Security Service she wouldn't normally discuss an operational deployment with a police constable but asked: 'How long until we worry about him?'

'I heard there was a drone they were wanting to use, but it's broken. The helicopter can't deal with a low cloud base. What would you say, Baz?'

'I'd say, Henry, that if he's for the jump they'll have started on the heavy work. By now they'll have your name, miss, and his over there,' he nodded at Hugo Woolmer, 'and they won't hang about after that. They'll assume the mountain's crawling with security and that there's vehicle blocks. They'll want to nut him, then clear off home for a wash.'

'Too right. Might have done it by now, miss.'

'You know him well enough – how would he take a rough-and-tumble with them? Round here there was once a fist fight between

two of the volunteers – the old days – about which of them should fire the bullet that killed a tout . . . How would he stand up to a beating, miss, burns and the full works? Another time, again in the old days but little's changed, they turned on the hob rings on a cooker and got the tout's trousers and pants off. When the rings were glowing, they sat him on them . . . Most don't last long. Might already be over.'

She nearly tripped over Hugo Woolmer's legs as she went outside. She threw away the barely smoked cigarette and was sick against a tree. He'd been staying in a hotel in London and had been with the cigarette people the night before. They'd needed to do the briefing early, and she'd knocked on his door. He'd unlocked it – must have come straight from the shower: a towel was knotted at his waist and she'd seen his skin. Nothing special – a few birthmarks, some straggly hair, no burns, no contusions from a club. His fingertips had been intact. The leaves at the base of the tree were saturated with her vomit.

Brennie Murphy didn't know. He should have known.

The men on the mountain looked to him for decisions on tactics and strategy, and for his guidance on targets in the mid-Ulster and Lurgan areas. He had good antennae and understood weakness in the enemy. Some had turned their back on the struggle, and the television each night carried clips of former fighters who now chuckled with the people they had tried to kill. It was as if the old colleagues of Brennie Murphy now pissed on him. He wouldn't compromise, take government grants, become a paid stooge and call himself a community officer: the armed struggle, for him, was alive. With so few engaged in – as they called it – 'keeping the fire lit', it was inevitable that the attention of the police and Five would be intense, worse than anything he had known when he was young. The attacks on what remained active of the Organisation were based on the technical excellence of the surveillance systems and also the infiltration of their cells by paid informers. Did he trust this man? Should he trust him?

The man sat on the chair. He did not quiz them, argue with

them or cringe. Men Brennie Murphy knew, who he might have believed were taking twenty, fifty, a hundred pounds a week would have come here and shown terror. The switching on of the drill would have brought a stain to their crotches, and they'd have pleaded their innocence too hard.

He and Malachy were in the hallway. They could see the man through the open door into the back bedroom. He asked, 'Do you believe him or not?'

'I don't know.'

'He's promised the shipment.'

'He's promised to bring it to a point in Europe. Then we get it home.'

'We need it.'

'The weapons bring the kids to us, not to the collaborators.'

'It's against every instinct in my body.'

'And mine.'

'But you must have the weapons.'

'Must have them, Brennie, or we're nothing.'

Brennie Murphy's nostrils flared. It wasn't strange, he told the kids, that a man of his age could harbour such hatred. More than anything in his life he dreaded abandoning the memory of the many who had died, old comrades. He prayed he would die before weakness pushed him towards compromise. The dead didn't deserve it. 'You'd have to go to test-fire – all of that,' he said. 'So's we're not skinned.'

'If I have to.'

Brennie took his arm. 'You do.'

They went back inside.

He sat on the chair, could have killed for a cigarette, but he wasn't offered one. Smoke came through from the hall where the two of them spoke in low voices.

He had realised that the room with the awful wallpaper would be easy to turn into a torture chamber. The makeover would be straightforward. He didn't doubt that in the kitchen or the main bedroom there was a roll of plastic sheeting, which would go

over the carpet and a Stanley knife would cut it. The blood, if they used the drill, would be spread low but they might use more plastic sheeting to cover the walls, pinned up near the ceiling. How did he feel? Not great. What could he do? Not much. Who'd give a damn? Not many. The two main men, the older one and the younger – the minders were 'soldiers' and of no relevance – wore no face masks. So they didn't mind if he saw their faces. He studied them so that he could remember them and, in time, go through the books of activists' photographs and identify them. It meant, even to a man far less bright and without his survival instincts, that either he had passed their tests or failed. Failure meant death.

Quick? No.

Possible to appeal to their better natures? Inappropriate.

Time to front up.

They'd stand over him and look down into his face. The younger man would likely smack him and blood would spill from his nose. Then he'd hear the drill start up. Others would be tying him to the chair and he'd hear the plastic being unwound. Before they put the gag in he'd yell for paper and a pencil. Whatever they wanted they could have. He'd name them all, starting with Matthew, the recruiter: a sly, cold bastard and he'd never known his surname.

He knew the full name of the team leader. He shouldn't have, but a mobile had rung in the man's pocket during a meal one summer evening on the Thames – their treat. It had been answered, 'Hugo Woolmer.' They could have that name. A few revolutions of the drill tip and Hugo Woolmer was theirs.

The girl was Gabrielle Davies. Another time, she'd been rooting in a purse for a credit card to pay at Starbucks and he'd seen her Service card, just a glimpse of her name. She'd noticed him looking and had flushed at her lapse. Woolmer had called her Gaby when they'd walked in Windsor Great Park. She'd bailed out of a trattoria with a train to catch in Birmingham and the waiter had called that the taxi for 'Davies' was outside. They could have her too. She was nice, pretty, a striver, different from the tossers and their women, but she'd go on the paper if the drill started up.