



**THE
STRANGE
CASE OF
MR PELHAM**

**ANTHONY
ARMSTRONG**

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The Strange Case of Mr Pelham

Anthony Armstrong

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Edited by Nick Smith

Introduction

There can be little doubt that Anthony Armstrong would have whole-heartedly approved of this reissue of his classic 1950s thriller *The Strange Case of Mr. Pelham*. This conclusion can only be drawn indirectly, but there exist the sort of clues that Armstrong himself would have liked, if you know where to look for them.

Writing from his country cottage Margarets, deep in a leafy corner of Hampshire, Armstrong—a man who produced so many words that you can only deduce that he loved the process of committing them to paper—is apologising to one of his readers over the lack of availability of his earlier books. In a surprisingly long note to a stranger, he confides in Mrs Hislaw that he shares her sense of an injustice perpetrated. “I am sorry,” he types on an old manual typewriter early one September at some point in the 1960s, “but nothing can be done about the books, except keep an eye open for them at second-hand bookshops. They have been out of print for some years now and I am constantly getting letters—to my annoyance, for the publishers would not reprint them – telling me there was no longer a demand. My daughter has picked up *Village at War* and *We Keep Going* on a second-hand bookstall at Cambridge, but those are the only spares even I have!”

What’s interesting about this unpublished letter, signed in his customary turquoise ink, is not so much that Armstrong is referring to his quintet of ‘Country House’ memoirs that were so popular during the Second World War and the decade that followed. Rather that he mentions towards the end that, as he is

now a presenter on a national television gardening show, he had assumed that this would lend his out-of-print works the kind of sympathetic magic that might get the presses rolling again. His letter finished on a plaintive note, wondering if publishers will ever again be interested in his earlier books. Sixty-four years after it first appeared in our bookshops in 1957, and nearly half a century after its author's death, *The Strange Case of Mr. Pelham* has finally caught a publisher's eye. With the publication of this edition of Pelham, we have the only 21st century reissue of this superb British tale of suspense, welcomed by one of today's finest spy thriller writers Mick Herron, who expresses a sentiment that will be echoed by aficionados of the genre: "It's a pleasure to see Anthony Armstrong's classic back in print, ready to unnerve a new generation of readers with its eerie tale of fractured identity."

While it is tempting to construct from Armstrong's letter to Mrs Hislaw the picture of a struggling author who'd never quite fulfilled his potential, nothing could be further from the truth.

Although we can't be exactly sure of when he wrote his characteristically charming note, the evidence points to it post-dating the publication of *The Strange Case of Mr. Pelham*. Arguably his most successful novel, it was published on both sides of the Atlantic, translated into several languages, dramatised for radio broadcast and committed to celluloid for both television and the silver screen. The fact that the cover design of the British first edition of Pelham includes a superb duotone illustration commissioned from a hugely popular artist of the day, Albany Wiseman, suggests that the publisher Methuen & Co took the book's production and reputation seriously enough to invest real money in it.

Although it has fallen into a deep and, some would say, unjustified obscurity, the name Anthony Armstrong was once one to be reckoned with. Although it's hard to be certain how many books he wrote in a career spanning six decades, once the thrillers, romances, comedies of manners, war memoirs, country house reminiscences, plays, collections of journalism, children's books

and anthologies are taken into account, it's a safe bet that he saw to press more than a hundred, and that untangling the oeuvre would present a serious challenge to a bibliographer. Despite being such a prolific author, outside specialist book collecting circles, these days Armstrong is only really remembered for his novel *The Strange Case of Mr. Pelham* (that started out as a short story), and perhaps his play *Ten Minute Alibi* (that ended up as a novel). That these works have remained in the public eye at all is largely due to the fact that they were both made into classic British crime films. *Ten Minute Alibi* was produced in 1935 at Beaconsfield Studios (now the National film and Television School), while *Pelham*, after a long and complex history of radio and television productions (in which the legendary filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock plays a significant part), went on to become the 1970 psychological thriller *The Man Who Haunted Himself*, starring Roger Moore, fresh off the back of the success of *The Saint*.

While Moore was to scale even greater heights playing the role of secret agent James Bond in seven of the 007 movies, in his memoir – *My Word is My Bond* – he says that he rated Harold Pelham as his apex character performance: “it was a film I actually got to act in, rather than just being all white teeth and flippant and heroic.” Moore recalls how he immersed himself in the narrative to produce an intense and layered role. He seized Pelham with gusto, portraying his psychological deterioration as his reputation and family life are dismantled by outside forces. As one commenter says: “Moore expertly worked the source material and screenplay to show the horror of a decent, successful family man reduced to insanity as he’s stalked by an unexplained doppelgänger, indulging in the excesses of London society in the late 1960s.”

The Strange Case of Mr. Pelham is Armstrong’s own novelisation of a short story dating back to the 1930s, in which the protagonist is an innocuous, conventional, traditionalist English bachelor, who acquires a doppelgänger with an opposite personality and a sinister agenda. Opening in Monte Carlo, the story is told through the eyes of

a young couple exploring a casino, where they learn of a mysterious gambler by the name of Pelham. Intrigued by both Pelham and his glamorous companion, they delve into the stranger's past, only to discover that not long before he had been a different man. In the manner of the suspense thriller of yesteryear, Armstrong's narrative deftly unfolds as Pelham becomes aware of a mystery 'double' taking advantage of his socially distant life. As this almost paranormal figure makes its influence more known, a creeping terror begins to infect Pelham, whose inconspicuous existence is thrown out of equilibrium. A series of apparent coincidences and mistaken identities initially creates moments of confusion and mild levity, only to gradually accelerate into something more sinister, causing Pelham to spiral into a psychological crisis as his doppelgänger takes control.

While most contemporary reviews tended to politely agree that *The Strange Case of Mr. Pelham* was "a lightly amusing tale of suspense and terror," perhaps the most perceptive analysis came from one critic—his name now lost to history—who read the tale as "an extraordinarily irritating piece of cleverness." Although his letter to Mrs Hislaw may not have overbrimmed with confidence about the future of his series of memoirs recounting the bucolic idyll of family life at Margarets, Armstrong was much more optimistic about the path ahead for a story that was to stay with him in one form or another for much of the second half of his career.

In his unpublished four-volume autobiography *Funny Side Up*, he goes into some detail about the trajectory of his most famous creation:

"As a matter of interest that original short story, *The Strange Case of Mr. Pelham*, had a most profitable and varied career. It was first published in the American magazine *Esquire* in 1940, was next broadcast over there as a playlet in 1941, done three times on BBC Radio in 1946, and later twice on TV, published over here in *Britannia* and then in two other magazines, turned into a film script (as stated above), published again in America and three

times on the continent. In 1955 it was done yet again on both BBC and US TV, and also in Australia and New Zealand, after which I turned it into a full-length novel which was published here and in New York and finally in Italy. Not bad for one small short story. It'll probably bob up again somewhere yet."

Nick Smith

Swansea

December 2020.

A Note on the Text:

*This edition of *The Strange Case of Mr. Pelham* is based on the text of the first UK trade edition published by Methuen & Co in 1957. While every reasonable care has been taken to ensure the accuracy of the original text, the opportunity has been taken to silently correct the more obvious typographical errors of punctuation and spelling that are inevitably present in any first edition.*

The Strange Case of Mr Pelham

1

If a chilly little wind had not started to rustle in from the east over Monte Carlo harbour that late autumn evening, David and Joanna Lightfoot would probably never have met Mr Pelham—and their life would have followed a far different and far happier course. But, gradually, the still reflections of the harbour lights and the moon became increasingly ruffled into trembling cascades of ruby and emerald and pearl, till at last Joanna said, “Brr!” and involuntarily shivered. At once her young husband took her arm, and instead of continuing their proposed walk round the humped headland of Monaco old town, steered her solicitously back towards Monte Carlo, till, as if by accident, they found themselves outside the Casino. Here David appeared to be struck with a sudden idea.

“I say, Jo darling, what about going in and having a crack at the tables?”

“Didn’t we say we weren’t going to tonight?”

“I know. But I’ve all at once got a feeling that my luck’s in.”

Joanna laughed, seeing through him, tolerant of his speciousness. “We agreed that tonight we’d be firm, and just walk round the rock and look at the lights on the water and the moon and...”

“But then it got too chilly and that’s part of my hunch. See! Fate absolutely drove us away from the lights on the water straight to the door of the Casino.” He grinned persuasively. “For what purpose? Why, to win a packet.”

“Darling, what are you going to use for money? You *know* we’ve only got just enough to last us till we go home on Friday.”

“We could use that.”

“Heavens! Suppose we lose?”

“Then we’ll have to leave here tomorrow. On the other hand...”

“But I don’t want to go back before we planned. It’s three whole days, and I love this place. I’d like to stay even longer. Oh, damn the currency restrictions!”

“They’re better than they were.”

“And the absurd thing is we can easily afford to stay well beyond Friday, if only...”

“If only the money wasn’t at home; I know. Compulsory paupers—that’s the English abroad.”

“Well, I think it’s all idiotic. Why on earth can’t the Government...”

“Come off it, Jo! I know words and music by heart. Look here! Shall we have a gamble?”

“I thought that’s what all the argument was about.”

“No, I mean a real one.” He had taken his wallet from his pocket and pulled out the notes it contained. “Listen! We’ve got our return tickets and two thousand for journey money tucked safely away in our room, haven’t we?”

“Yes, and who made you do that?”

“Well, here’s *this* for the hotel bill to date: I checked with them this afternoon.” He counted out some notes. “Now, let’s see, dinner was two thousand two hundred. Then there’s our room tonight, and tomorrow’s breakfast.” He calculated further, added some more notes and held up the little wad. “This lot will take care of our hotel up to midday tomorrow. And *this*”—he held up the rest—“is what’s over and is to try our luck with tonight.”

“But David! That...”

“Listen, darling! Here’s the gamble I mean. You just said you’d like to stay longer; very well then, take a sporting chance on it. Either we leave tomorrow, or we turn this little packet into staying on here for—well, it depends on how much we win.”

Joanna’s eyes suddenly sparkled. All at once she was attracted by the idea. “Maybe you have got something, darling.”

“I have. Don’t you see we’re staking at most three days against possibly six, nine, a fortnight—who knows? And, quite honestly, I do have the feeling that luck’s with me tonight.”

Joanna hesitated a moment longer. Then she said: “O.K. Let’s. But I’m going to keep the hotel money just in case you decide on another gamble and we stay on that fortnight in a prison cell.” She took the first wad of notes from him and put it firmly in her bag. “Only over my dead body.”

David was counting the other roll. “Roughly about fifteen thousand,” he said. “We ought to do something with that.”

“I hope it’s a nice day for travelling tomorrow,” said Joanna resignedly. “Well, come on in.”

The large hall with the roulette tables was crowded, every chair taken, and people standing behind betting over the shoulders of those seated.

“No places,” murmured Joanna, when David had changed their notes into plaques and they had walked round the room.

“Bother! My hunch says I’ve *got* to gamble sitting down tonight. Besides, when my money’s on the table in front of me I can see how much I’m making.”

“Your hunch certainly seems on the job,” replied Joanna lightly, though she was really as excited as he was. “Did it remind you to order the truck to cart the stuff away afterwards? Well, let’s wait at this table here. I’m sure that man with the purple dinner-jacket is going bust soon.”

“No, that’s not the table for tonight.” He took her arm and steered her to one on the far side of the room. “Yes,” he announced solemnly, as if deciding on a purchase in a shop, “yes, this is ours, I think.”

“Good old hunch! *He* knows! Come on then! We’ll get behind those two old ladies.”

They moved over and waited, standing close behind the line of seated gamblers.

“That chap at the far end, on the right of the croupier, is doing well,” remarked Joanna after a while. “Look at that pile in front of him and he’s just won some more.”

“Ah, but you don’t know how much he’s lost earlier on.”

“True. Or how much he had to start with.”

“More than us, I’ll bet.”

“He’s won again,” said Joanna, a few minutes later.

David looked along to the end. “His girlfriend’s losing it for him, though. The piece with all the jewellery. He’s just passed her a couple of ten-thousands.”

While his wife continued to watch the lucky gambler, David studied the girl. She was young, beautifully dressed, had coppery-red hair and seemed from that distance extremely attractive. He felt a sudden urge to move over to that half of the table and get a closer look, but it was more crowded and he did not wish to miss his chance of a seat.

“*Rien ne va plus,*” intoned the croupier, as the little ball clattered round on its money-making, money-losing course. A moment later it was trapped to circling immobility and he announced loudly, with the hint of satisfaction peculiar to the breed on such occasions: “*Le Zéro!*”

A little buzz broke out round the table, and in a few minutes, Joanna again turned to her husband.

“There’s something funny about that man, David. Well, I don’t really mean funny. But he’s betting very high and winning quite a lot and behaving as to the manner born and... There! See!”

At that moment, with a pleasant yet somehow sardonic little smile, the man, who had won again on the next throw, casually pushed a high-denomination plaque towards the croupier at his end of the table with a “*Pour la service!*”

“These croupiers cut it pretty fat, don’t they? Whacking tips when someone brings off a killing, and don’t have to give it back if the chap loses... But what’s funny about him? Most people tip the...”

“The—the poise,” Joanna explained, “yet he looks like a small-town businessman.”

“Oh, I see what you mean. Yes, he is frightfully ordinary to look at.”

“Do you think he’s an absconding bank clerk from Surbiton, having a good old fling before the police catch up with him?”

“Not likely. All that man-of-the-world stuff couldn’t have been acquired by a bank clerk in years. Nor by a retired Army major, for that’s what he looks like too. But he’s certainly a puzzle. Those evening clothes didn’t come from Surbiton.”

“The girl must cost a bit too. I wouldn’t mind betting that’s a Dior, and her jewellery isn’t Woolworth exactly. Still, I expect she’s worth every penny of it, don’t you think?” she added mischievously.

“She doesn’t interest me,” returned her husband loftily, and not very truthfully.

“I see. Someone has to twist your arm first.” She scrutinised the girl again. “She doesn’t fit in with him either. Much too much of a glamour-puss to go with that little clipped moustache and round face and slightly worried look, and—well, general insignificance. I can’t see his eyes from here but I wouldn’t be surprised if they were like a spaniel’s—gooey and pleading, you know. I *wonder* what he is!”

“Personally, I can’t put it higher than manager of an insurance office.”

“Then he must have managed to insure quite a lot of people all living to a hundred... Oh, look! He’s lost for once. I was...”

Her left arm was suddenly taken in a friendly grasp just above the elbow. Turning, she saw Fred Dyson, a holiday-made acquaintance staying at the same hotel. His other hand was similarly holding her husband.

“Hullo, you two! Didn’t you say this morning you were giving up gambling hells? You’ve got to last till Friday, haven’t you?”

“No. David’s decided we’re going to last for another ten days, or only till tomorrow.”

“It’s going to be ten days, Fred. There’s luck at this table tonight. We’ve been watching a fellow... Oh, perhaps *you’d* like a guess. What do you put that chap down there as? Bank clerk, insurance, retired Army?”

“Which one? Oh, that’s Mr Pelham! J. M. Pelham.”

“You know him?”

“Well, met him once briefly. But I know an acquaintance of his fairly well, a Captain Masters who spends a lot of time out here, and he took me along to a party Pelham threw two nights ago, after he’d made a killing at baccarat.” He chuckled. “He’s no bank clerk or insurance type though. He’s in business, and...”

“Ah, I said a small-town businessman right at the start,” exclaimed Joanna with satisfaction.

“Small-town? Not on your life. He’s big. An importing and exporting firm in London. Masters gave me some of the lowdown on him.”

“What does he import and export?”

“All sorts of things; I haven’t a clue. But whatever they are he does darn’ well out of it; I imagine he’s pretty wide.”

“Wide?”

“Clever, darling, he means. Even tricky, eh, Fred?”

“Yes, I gather it’s not what he imports and exports, but the way he does it.”

“How? Oh, smuggling?” Joanna was highly intrigued. “Do you mean he’s a kind of crook?”

“Quiet, Jo!” David looked quite nervous. “I don’t know what the libel laws in France are, but don’t let’s find out the hard way!”

“I see.” She lowered her voice. “But I’m *interested*.”

“What I mean, Joanna, is that—except one thing that this Captain Masters hinted at, and that probably *was* a libel—there’s never been any breath of...”

“Scandal?”

“No, no. It’s hard to explain, but if you’re in business and you’re hedged round with silly regulations and officious Customs officers and declarations in quadruplicate and so forth, you’ve got to be

smart if you're not to go under. And he's as clever as a hatful of monkeys—that's Master's description, by the way."

"Well!" ejaculated David, much impressed. "I'd never have believed that that class of chap could look so plain ordinary."

"They don't. I should say he's unique in that respect. But, just occasionally, his eyes give him away. They're—they're—well, they sort of change."

"Nothing wrong with his eyesight when it comes to picking a girl," remarked David appreciatively. "She's a smasher. Though distance may be lending enchantment."

"Not on your life. She's unique in a way too. I've only talked to her once, at that party the other night, but—oh boy!" He broke off with a laugh. "Seriously though, they're the queerest pair I've ever met."

"Who is she?"

"His secretary, I think. Anyway she goes everywhere with him, and..."

Joanna here interrupted. A fragment of their earlier conversation which had intrigued her at the time suddenly came back to her mind. "I say, Fred! You said just now something about Captain Masters hinting at one thing about Mr Pelham's business..."

"It wasn't to do with his business."

"Then it sounds even more interesting. Tell me!"

"I said it was probably a libel, so I'd better not..."

"Oh but please! I want to know."

"It was only some kind of rumour. Happened last year. Something about a party on his yacht with some young people, and drugs and things. One girl was quite ill and the story was he and his fancy piece there had been teaching the youngsters to experiment with drugs. His parties are pretty wild anyway, but I expect this was only a bit of spicy embroidery. The girl had merely drunk more than she could take—and you know what rumours are. And, honestly, Joanna, I don't think we ought to pull him to pieces like this. He's just a clever businessman and cleverness, in business, covers a lot of..."

“But there must have been...”

“Has he partners in his firm?” asked David, catching a mute appeal for help from the other.

“Honestly, I haven’t an idea. I...” He broke off and waved to a lean spare man with an aquiline nose and a heavy moustache who had come up behind the players on the far side of the table. “But there’s the very chap for you, if you’re both so interested—Masters himself.” He beckoned and the tall man smiled and nodded and made his way round to them.

“Hullo, Dyson!” He smiled at the other two, anticipating the introduction.

“Hullo there! May I introduce you to Mrs Lightfoot—Captain Masters—and her husband David Lightfoot!”

“Pleasure. Seen you about with Dyson once or twice. Havin’ luck?”

“We haven’t played yet.”

“They’re far too interested in Mr Pelham there. Fairly badgering me about him and I only know just the few things you mentioned the other night.”

“Oh, Jim Pelham? Strange type, isn’t he?” laughed Masters. “The difference between his external appearance and...”

“Yes, that’s what intrigued us in the first place,” David cut in.

“They were asking just now if he had business partners.”

“Lord no! He’s very much on his own. Doubt if any partner could keep up with him. Smart as a whistle. Pelham Lake and Co. is his firm, but Lake was only a figurehead and, anyway, died years ago, so he’s had it for a long while. Funny thing is, though, that it was an awful stick-in-the-mud concern, conservative and unenterprising, y’know, up till about a year back when he suddenly launched out in a big way. Brought off some most amazin’ coups, I’m told, all inside of three months.”

“Maybe,” suggested Fred Dyson, “he suddenly realised all he was missing in life, and decided to pull his socks up, make money and have fun.”

“Possibly. Though of course...”

“You mean,” interrupted Joanna, “that before the time he pulled his socks up, as Fred says, he was just like—well, like what he still looks.”

“Imagine so. But what I was goin’ to say was, just about that time he had rather a shock, which may have had quite a bit to do with it.”

“What? Something like a bang on the head,” asked David, “which suddenly put the old brain into top gear?”

“No. Mental shock. He had a nasty, unnervin’ experience. A strange case altogether.”