

ACCIDENT
by
DESIGN

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E.C.R.
LORAC

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THE
CRIME
CLUB



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Accident by Design

E. C. R. Lorac

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Chapter 1

1

“I think it’s horrible! You’ve only done it for your own satisfaction . . . to give you a sense of power. It’s absolute sadism.”

Gerald Vanstead heard his wife’s voice rise in pitch, get shriller and uglier with every word she uttered, and his own nerves seemed to jangle in protest. Why *must* Meriel shout like that? . . . and was her accent getting worse every day?

In complete contrast came his sister’s voice. Judith Vanstead had always had a beautiful voice—their father had often laughingly called her Cordelia.

“Would it be a good idea to look up sadism in the dictionary, Meriel?” asked Judith. “I don’t think you really understand what it implies. Anyway, never mind. I’m sorry you’re upset, but I had to tell you exactly how things are. It’s right that you should know. Waterson is one of the greatest surgeons living and he wouldn’t suggest operating if he didn’t think it worth while. It may give father another twelve months—he will see the spring again. . . .”

She broke off, and turned to her brother. “I must go up to Father again now, Gerald. I’ll leave you to talk to Meriel; you’ll be better at explaining than I am.”

Judith moved quietly across the room, serene and dignified, as though she had not even heard her sister-in-law’s shrill voice uttering abuse. Gerald stood up automatically as his sister crossed the room, old habit and training reasserting itself. He opened the door for Judith and closed it behind her, and Meriel broke out again in venomous shrillness.

“*It is* horrible. . . . He’s nearly eighty, he’s got this hideous disease and suffers hell . . . and Judith and the surgeons have persuaded him to have another operation, just to make him live a few months longer, when life’s nothing but hell for him anyway. . . . Why can’t they let him go quietly, help him out.”

“Look here, Meriel, you mustn’t say things like that,” protested Gerald. “You’re being very indiscreet, to say the least of it. Don’t let Judith get the impression you’re wanting Father to die. It’s——” He broke off, and then added lamely: “Well—we’re the last people who ought to say things like that, old girl, aren’t we? Liable to be misinterpreted.”

Meriel looked across at her husband, her face sullen and flushed and obstinate. “You know what I mean, Jerry, so don’t get riding the high horse,” she said. “You agreed with me yesterday when I said it was a horrible idea to operate on him again.”

“I know I did, but I didn’t realise that the surgeon thought they could give him another year or two. Dash it all, Merry, the poor old boy wants to go on living . . . it’s his decision. If he finds life worth living—well, good luck to him.”

“*It isn’t* his decision. It’s Judith’s,” she replied. “He told me weeks ago that all he wanted was to go out quietly, he was sick of the everlasting pain. Judith doesn’t want to keep him alive for his own happiness, but for her own prestige. She’s Miss Vanstead of Templedean Place . . . she runs this place and queens it over the Village. *You* know, Jerry. She’s everything. You’re nothing. And I’m plain dirt.”

Gerald muttered an uncomfortable disclaimer, his thin face twitching unhappily, but Meriel cut in again:

“Another year or two, Jerry. . . . Do you think I’m going on like this for another year or two?—being condescended to by Judith, knowing all the time she despises me and thinks I’m just an ill-bred slut? When I stuck it out in that bloody Jap prison camp, it wasn’t to come here and be treated like Judith’s poor relation. I fought for my life and Alan’s . . . even you don’t know what I did to keep him alive . . . while Judith was driving a W.V.S. car and talking about equality of sacrifice because she had no butler. God, she makes me sick!”

Meriel caught her breath in a gasp that was not far removed from hysteria, and Gerald said hastily, “Come upstairs and have a drink, Merry. You need it. So do I. I’ve got some gin in the wardrobe.”

Meriel laughed—a laugh which was half a sob. “Gin in the wardrobe! What would Judith say? I know . . . that it’s my influence . . . you were a gentleman till you married me.”

2

They crossed the wide hall, where the great front door stood open to admit the sunshine, and the light gleamed on ancient oak of floor and panelling, and seemed to caress the madonna lilies and blue delphiniums which stood superbly in huge cut-glass vases on dower chest and table. Gerald followed his wife up the shallow oak stairs, aware of two feelings playing tug of war in his weary mind: Templedean was beautiful—the most beautiful house in the country—and he was beginning to hate it. Suddenly he seemed to be back in Malaya, sweating half naked beside his fellow prisoners, while Jap guards lounged nearby . . . and Meriel and Alan were in that filthy compound beyond the wire fencing, suffering God knows what privation and brutality. He remembered Meriel’s courage, her passionate selfless devotion to their small son, and he understood why she raged now against Judith’s calm superiority—Judith and her Daimler, driving for the W.V.S. . . . and doing without a butler amid the peace and plenty of Templedean, while Meriel had lived through years of sub-human beastliness in a Jap prison camp.

Gerald drew level with his wife, and thrust his arm through hers, giving it a squeeze, angry with himself because he had been irritated by her shrill voice. She was worth a thousand of Judith, and he knew it.

“There’s a circus coming to the fair ground at Watercombe, Merry. We must take Alan. It’d be rather a lark to go there by ourselves first, though—make an evening of it, eh?”

They had reached the first-floor landing as he spoke, and a light footstep in the corridor on his right made Gerald look round uneasily. . . . Circuses and larks . . . he’d said the wrong thing again. But it wasn’t Judith who was approaching; it was Herbert Standish—the old man’s secretary. Standish had a prim pallid face, and its air of permanent disapproval did not seem to have been intensified by what he had heard. He stood aside, with a slight bow to Meriel, waiting for her to move on, and Gerald kept hold of her arm, knowing that Standish despised such behaviour.

“A circus? Good-o! Just suits me,” giggled Meriel.

3

Meriel crossed the vast sunny bedroom and flung herself on the deep window seat, while her husband groped at the back of a wardrobe and produced gin and angostura. He poured out a couple of stiff drinks into their tooth glasses and joined Meriel by the window, saying “Cheers” automatically as he gulped down his drink.

“That’s better,” he said. “It’s regarded as a low-down habit to drink in the morning in this high-minded establishment, but a drink was indicated.”

Meriel nodded. “It just about saved my life, Jerry. I’ve never felt so down before, not even with the Nips. After all, we were all in it together then . . . and you can stand a lot if other people are with you. What defeats me here is knowing I’m despised by everybody.”

He put his thin hand over his wife’s plump one. “You’re not. There’s always me, Meriel.”

“I know, old boy, but even you look down your nose at me sometimes these days. You’re Judith’s brother, and you were brought up here, and you realise that I’m just a lousy Colonial with an Australian accent. . . . Judith’s trying to improve Alan’s voice now. I suppose it’s funny, but it gets my goat.”

Gerald flushed unhappily, and she went on quickly: “We’ve got to have it out sometime, Jerry, so let’s get it over. When we settled down with my folks in Queensland after we got away from the Nips we were as happy as kings, but Judith cabled you to come back because your father couldn’t live for six months——”

“I *had* to come, Merry. Both my brothers had been killed, and I am the old boy’s heir. I hadn’t seen him for twelve years, and I couldn’t refuse to come.”

“I know, poor old boy, I know. I’m not blaming you. I knew you wanted to come back here——”

“I wanted you to come, too, Merry, and Alan. It’s to be our home, and I looked forward to showing it to you, and giving you a good time here. You’ve had a pretty poor time since you married me, I know that.”

“Oh, can it, Jerry. Never mind about all that. It’s *now* we’ve got to think about, not the past or the future. And I tell you that I can’t stick it any longer, here and now. I’m through. I’ve had enough. We’ve been here for nearly two years, being treated as poor relations. It may not matter to you, but it does to me. I can’t stick any more of it. Another two years of this? Hell! I’d be in a madhouse before that.”

“But Meriel darling, what else *can* we do? You know I haven’t got any money. Everything in Malaya went to bloody blazes—burnt, sacked, looted. . . .”

“I know, Jerry. I saw it happen, don’t forget that. You’re going back to the past again. It’s *now* that matters. You say the old man’s going to live for another two years. All right, but I’m not staying here for another two years, watching Judith playing at being God Almighty and teaching Alan to despise me and you to look down your nose at me. I’m going back to Queensland, and Alan’s coming with me. It’s up to you to decide what you’re going to do. You’ve got to make up your own mind.”

Gerald got up and poured himself out another drink. His hands were unsteady and his eyes blurred. He had always been a nervy creature, and his experiences in a Japanese prison camp had undermined his health and nerves alike. He swallowed his drink and turned back to his wife.

“You know as well as I do that I haven’t got the money to pay your fares back,” he retorted, “so that’s that.”

“Oh no, it isn’t, Jerry. Where there’s a will there’s a way. Old Nick Jamieson would send me the money if I cabled him. The last thing he said to me was I’d only got to ask. He knew I should hate it here, and was he right? Like hell he was!”

Gerald took a deep breath and strove hard to keep himself in hand. He wasn’t going to quarrel with his wife, but something inside him urged him to shout at her in a rage. Couldn’t she see that what she suggested was outrageous?

“Look here, Merry. Don’t fly off the handle. I know it’s sickening for you, but stick it out. This place is to be ours, yours and mine, and then Alan’s. It won’t always be like this. I know Judith irritates you——”

“Irritates me? Get this clear, old boy. If I stay in this house with her much longer I shall strangle her. Get my hands round that superior lily-white neck of hers and just choke the breath out of her. Irritate me? I’d say she does. And then some.”

Gerald’s face twitched, but before he could answer, Meriel went on: “Sorry, old boy. That was a rotten thing to say. After all, she is your sister, but I can’t help loathing her. I’m not used to being treated like a skunk. When it comes to the realities of living, I could work Judith to a standstill in two twos, and folks aren’t ashamed of working in my home town. I hate all this eyewash and poodle-faking, and high-falutin’. If this is culture, give me the other thing!”

Gerald sighed, the sigh of a weak, indeterminate man. He had seen this issue facing him for months, and shirked it. Now he couldn’t shirk it any longer, but he still tried to temporise.

“Don’t be in such a tearing hurry, Meriel. Wait a bit. You see, I can’t clear out all in a rush. I’ve got to be here until after father’s operation, anyway. It’d look just too frightful to go away before we know . . . people would talk.”

“Who the hell cares what people say? That’s the trouble with you folks over here. You’re always worrying about what somebody else will say,” she retorted. “Anyway, they’re operating next week, aren’t they? Trust these swell sawbones to make sure of their fee. Well, I’ll agree to stay on here till the end of this month, Jerry, but no longer. Otherwise it’ll be the same old game again, and Judith calling the tune because she’s got the dibs. Send Alan to a nice prep school, away from *me*, that is. Come between you and me so that you realise what an outsider your wife is, I know. I’ve watched it. One thing, you can bet your bottom dollar Judith won’t do anything to stop me going back home. She’ll be delighted, right down to her boots. And if you’d got a ha’porth of spunk you’d walk out on her, and tell her why.”

“You don’t understand,” he began wearily, but Meriel cut in briskly.

“Oh yes I do! I may be a lousy Colonial but I’m not a fool, not anybody’s fool. What I don’t know about human nature isn’t worth knowing. And now give me another drink, Jerry, and tell me about that circus. I shall be just tickled to death to see something nice and vulgar. I’ve had enough high-hat to last me my natural.”

4

“Heaven bear me witness,” exclaimed Judith Vanstead. “I am *not* an uncharitable person, but that woman is impossible. I have never met such blatant, unashamed self-centredness.”

Walter Vanstead, brother to Judith’s and Gerald’s father, put down his book and cocked his bushy white eyebrows. “Are you making that statement as an item of news value?” he enquired. “I should have thought that the qualities you mention were patent in Gerald’s wife from the moment one set eyes on her. She is out for what she can get. I take it that her reaction to Waterson’s report is quite typical, resentment that Charles’s life may be prolonged.”

Judith turned away, her eyes filling with tears, and her uncle went on: “It’s no use being nice-minded in assessing your sister-in-law, my dear. When Charles dies, Gerald inherits, and when Gerald inherits, Gerald’s wife will make a clean sweep here. You will go, I will go. The servants will go, and the estate will go to blazes. Gerald always was a duffer, and he’s a duffer still. While you’re here, you can keep him on the rails to some extent. After all, tradition and

rearing count for something, but once he's left alone with that woman, he'll go to the pack. It's inevitable."

Judith sat down beside her uncle. "You're not being quite fair," she expostulated. "I wasn't fair, either, but Meriel's attitude made me angry. Meriel has got a lot of good qualities—she must have or she wouldn't have survived those awful experiences out in Malaya. She's got courage and loyalty and tenacity. I admit all that. It's probably my fault that I haven't managed to make friends with her. She's so crude."

"She is of another world from yours and she speaks another language," said Walter Vanstead. "She represents everything you and I dislike. She has bad taste, bad manners, and bad habits. If she weren't Gerald's wife you wouldn't have tolerated her in this house for a week, let alone for a year."

"But Meriel's had something to put up with too," urged Judith. "I realise it's galling for her, as a married woman, to live in a house controlled by another woman. I know she hates it —"

"Very well," replied Walter. "Let us assume that you are right, and that Meriel does hate being here. The answer to that is quite simple. Let her go somewhere else."

Judith raised her fine eyebrows. "But where?" she asked. "I can't turn her out, Uncle. After all, she and Gerald are here because I asked them here. Meriel is my guest, in a sense. While Father is alive, I am still mistress in this house, and when I cabled to Gerald to come home, I asked him to bring his wife with him."

"Admitted," replied Walter Vanstead, "but at the time it did not occur to us that Gerald and Meriel would be here as guests indefinitely. I repeat my suggestion—let her go somewhere else where she may conceivably be happier than she is at Templedean."

"Gerald hasn't any money, Uncle, and in any case it's difficult to get a small house now."

"Who suggested getting a small house? Certainly I did not," rejoined Walter dryly. "When I suggested that she should go somewhere else, I meant return to her own home and her own people. Although, for my own comfort, I avoid and ignore the pair of them as far as is possible, I am not totally unobservant, Judith. I give it as my considered opinion that if you or I were to offer Meriel the money to take her home to Queensland, she'd jump at the chance. I am quite willing to stand the expense. I should have the satisfaction of knowing that the distance between us would be as large as this rather small world allows."

"But, Uncle, she'd never go and leave Gerald here with us . . . and there's the boy. She wouldn't leave him, either."

"Very well," rejoined Walter Vanstead. "Then let her take them with her. I think she would have her work cut out to induce Gerald to agree, but I have no doubt whatever that she'd pull it off. She is, as you say, crude, but she's got twice the determination which Gerald possesses. I'll grant her that."

Judith studied her uncle with a frowning face. "I just don't understand you," she said. "When the doctors first told us that Father couldn't live very much longer, you and I both agreed that Gerald ought to come home, and that his wife should come here with him, so that Gerald could learn the running of the estate, and his wife get used to English ways and people. It was you who insisted that this was the wise and right thing to do, and Father agreed."

"I don't dispute it," replied Walter Vanstead, "but we tried to be wise in advance of our data—the data in this case being the qualities of two human beings, Gerald and his wife. After a fair trial, it is plain to all concerned that Gerald neither wants to learn the business of running the estate nor is capable of so learning even if he did wish it. As for his wife, she

dislikes and despises the English ways and people with which you wished her to become acquainted.”

“Even if we admit that all you say is true, Uncle, it’s no use sending them away now,” replied Judith wearily. “However difficult you and I may find the pair of them, Gerald is heir to Templedean. It is better for him to stay here. Actually, I think he has done better than you will admit. He is much less casual and slovenly than he was when he came, and he is beginning to make some efforts to be sociable and to take an interest in life here.”

“And you look forward with equanimity to a continuation of the sort of conditions we have been living under here for the past year or so?”

“What else *can* I do?” said Judith wearily. “I do my best, and believe me, I don’t find it easy. The peace we used to enjoy has gone and life becomes one long wrangle——”

“And so it will continue, unless we do something about it,” rejoined Walter Vanstead. “Why not agree to my suggestion?—give it a trial.”

Judith sat with her handsome dark head bent in thought. She was a graceful creature, and her forty years had imprinted but few signs of age on her. Fine bones and good muscles were responsible for her poise and easy movements; her hair was untouched by grey, her face scarcely lined. Sitting thus, with her dark head bent, her oval face resting on her slim hands, she still looked young.

“You suggest that Meriel goes back to Australia . . . and takes Gerald with her,” she said slowly, “What about Alan?”

“Of course he will go too,” rejoined Walter Vanstead. “You don’t imagine that his mother will leave her cub here to be educated and influenced by us? That is the very last thing she would do.”

“Very well. They go back there, and return here when Gerald inherits——”

“Possibly. Possibly not,” put in the other. “I have a very shrewd idea that once Mrs. Gerald gets back to her ‘home town’ as she calls it, she will feel no enthusiasm for returning to a place where folks treat her like a nasty smell—I quote the lady verbatim. And believe me, where Gerald’s wife chooses to reside, thither will her fool of a husband reside also.”

“But, Uncle, it’s impossible. What would happen here?”

“Templedean, with an absentee owner and yourself as tenant of this house, would once more be a place for civilised people to live in. It’s worth considering, Judith. You have a fair income of your own, and you’re very competent at estate management and gardening and poultry keeping. I think you could manage. After all, you’ve got to live somewhere. Why not here? Gerald isn’t interested in the house or the land. All he cares about is its value in terms of cash.”

Judith sat very still, her eyes downcast, while Walter Vanstead studied her with shrewd, penetrating eyes. It was fully a minute before she replied, and then she said:

“You are a very acute observer, Uncle. You may be right in your belief that Meriel wants to go back to her own home, and that she would take Gerald with her, but it’s not a position I care to consider. It would mean that, after Father’s death, I should have no security of tenure. Any day Meriel or Gerald might decide to come back, if only for the pleasure of humiliating and dispossessing myself. I couldn’t stand that. I’d rather leave the house altogether and make my own life elsewhere. No. It wouldn’t do. They must stay on here.”

“I think you are unwise, my dear. But think it over. Think of waking up one fine morning and realising that that woman’s voice will no longer be heard in this house. My God, that voice of hers . . .”

Chapter 2

1

Templedean Place stood on the western escarpment of the Cotswold Hills, six hundred feet above sea level. From the western terrace of the house the ground dropped steeply; far below, the rich plain of the Isbourne stretched away to the Severn Valley, mile upon mile of level fertile farm land. A little to the north Bredon Hill raised its characteristic contour, and in the far distance the Malvern Hills showed blue on the sky line. Templedean was an Elizabethan manor house, but Jacobean builders had enlivened its original austerity with Italianate enrichment of fanciful stonework and elaborate chimney stacks.

Sir Charles Vanstead, father of Gerald and Judith, was the third in line of wealthy industrialists who had amassed fortunes in the nineteenth century. Jabez Vanstead, grandfather to Sir Charles, had been born in Birmingham in the year 1800. His parents had been poor working folk, but Jabez had the brains and tireless energy which could earn money in the nineteenth century. When he died in 1870, he bequeathed a fortune to his son James, in addition to the Manor of Templedean. Jabez had claimed kinship with Vansteads of an earlier century who had owned Templedean, a matter which few disputed, for great wealth had arguing power, even in the mid-Victorian era. James was educated as a gentleman's son, but his brains were none the worse for an education totally irrelevant to industrialism and the techniques of the steel trade. James, like his father before him, was a hard worker, and when he died of an apoplexy in 1900, he left a fortune to his son Charles, which put the latter among the biggest industrial magnates of his day. Charles, born in 1869, had been to Eton and to Oxford: he had married the daughter of an adjacent landowner, and his wealth and her taste and knowledge made Templedean Place and its gardens famous, even in an area where architecture and gardening had flourished as sister arts for generations.

The war of 1914-18 did not diminish the Vanstead fortune: as taxation increased in the interwar years, Sir Charles spoke of imminent ruin, but his great industrial undertakings continued to make money. Even under the "crippling" taxation following the declaration of war in 1939, Sir Charles Vanstead was still an exceedingly wealthy man. His three sons, Charles, James, and Gerald, born in 1899, 1902, and 1905 respectively, had had a public school and university education, followed by such travelling as they fancied. Charles and James, cut to the parental pattern, were able, hard-working fellows who pulled their weight in the complex pattern of industrialism when they joined the firm their great-grandfather had founded. Judith, born in 1908, was also an exceedingly intelligent, clearheaded woman, who had developed the manner and charm of a great lady to offset an unusually acute and critical mind. Gerald was the exception in this family of acute intelligences. Frail in infancy, nervy and unhealthy in boyhood and adolescence, Gerald was the duffer of the family: useless at lessons, inept at games, devoid of social grace he was the despair of his family. It certainly never occurred to a dominating father or to brothers endowed with a high degree of intelligence and vigour that more than half Gerald's trouble was due to fear of his own family. Knowing himself for a duffer, he had spent an unhappy boyhood as the family butt. It was not until 1930, when Sir Charles had agreed to let his youngest son go out to Malaya, that Gerald ever really made any attempt to use such intelligence and initiative as he did possess. Once

away from his family, he became a reasonably competent and reliable fellow. He learnt the business of a rubber planter, and bought his own plantation in 1935. In 1937 he married the daughter of a Queensland stationer. Gerald met Meriel in Singapore, where she had come for a holiday. Over the business of courtship and marriage Gerald showed no hesitation or shilly shallying; perhaps Meriel, who certainly had a mind of her own, provided some of the necessary impetus. Be that as it may, Gerald loved his wife, and Meriel was the right wife for him. She was a shrewd, practical, hard-working girl, and she not only loved Gerald Vanstead, she admired him. For the first time in his life, Gerald lived with somebody who admired him, studied him, petted him, and gave him sound practical advice in words which he could understand. Released by his marriage from the frustrations and lack of self-confidence which had made him a nonentity, Gerald Vanstead had a few years of ideal happiness. His son was born in 1939, and life seemed perfect. In 1943 he and his wife and child were involved in the nightmare of the Japanese occupation of Malaya: they were just units in the sum total of human misery which overwhelmed the Far East like a flood.

2

On that same sunny June morning when Meriel had asserted to Gerald her determination to return to Australia, Herbert Standish strolled across the gardens at Templedean and went by way of a wrought-iron gate in the clipped beech hedge into the wooded pasture or park which lay beyond the formal gardens.

Standish had been secretary to Sir Charles Vanstead since 1945. He was a man of outstanding ability, who had taken a degree in economics and was a fine mathematician. In addition to this he had a scientific mind and enough training in physics to make him able to follow some of the more recondite research into nuclear fission. Perhaps the fact that he was content with his extremely comfortable post as Sir Charles Vanstead's secretary was a measure of some weakness of fibre in Standish's makeup: he preferred a well-paid and comfortable job which gave him the opportunity of studying the results of other men's research to a less well-paid job in which he could have done research work himself. Sir Charles, who was a shrewd judge of men, had once said to Judith that Herbert Standish tended to the dilettanti—he had too many subsidiary interests. He had a passion for music, not unusual in a mathematician; he was a good field naturalist and an omnivorous reader, but he was also a very good secretary and had a faculty for expounding scientific theory, which Sir Charles found valuable. Standish had his own sitting room and a small naturalist's lab, but he lived as one of the family at Templedean, and had become almost part of the background, as it were. He was ready to make a fourth at bridge, to play billiards, to drive a car, and generally to assist Judith in her social activities. To some extent Standish took the place of Judith's elder brothers, who had both been killed during the war. Charles was killed during the bombing of 1941, and James had lost his life in an aeroplane crash in 1945. Standish, a man of observant and analytical mind, did not believe that Judith had had any deep affection for her brothers, but she missed them: missed, perhaps, the things they did for her, and she seemed glad when Standish came to live at Templedean and showed his willingness to be of service to her.

Strolling through the park, glancing occasionally at the beautiful Jersey cows that were pasturing there, Standish meditated on the situation in the Vanstead household. For Gerald he had no use at all: from his first meeting with Sir Charles's heir, Standish had disliked and despised him. He disliked Meriel, also, but he did not despise her. He recognised her

determination and vigour, and the fact that Meriel had loathed him at sight amused rather than annoyed him.

“Hullo, Standish. How’s things?”

The voice which hailed Standish was that of Gilbert Barton, who farmed the Home Farm at Templedean, and acted as agent to the estate. Surprisingly, considering the difference in their characters and interests, Standish and Barton got on very well together, and enjoyed one another’s company. Barton, a big fair man approaching forty, came striding over the pasture towards Standish and fell into step with him, as the latter replied:

“Things are better than we dared hope. Waterson is hopeful about the result of operating, and Sir Charles has agreed to undergo it. They hope to give him another year or two.”

“Poor old boy,” said Barton. “Why on earth does he want to hold on? Last time I saw him, he was a mere skeleton, animated by that amazing intelligence. Can life be worth while when a man’s reduced to such physical misery?”

“That’s for him to decide,” rejoined Standish. “I think it is his intellectual power which gives him the fortitude to disregard physical deterioration and suffering. He’s an amazing old man, still as passionately interested in modern research as ever he was.” Standish paused a moment and then added: “Waterson’s decision has created a situation up at the house. That fool Gerald is in a worse dither than usual, trying to keep in with Judith on the one hand and his wife on the other. Her attitude doesn’t take much guessing.”

“You know, I’m sorry for them,” said Barton, “especially for her. She hasn’t had a fair deal here.”

“Good God! The woman’s had everything a woman could want at Templedean,” protested Standish.

“Oh no, she hasn’t,” retorted Barton. “She’s been treated as an interloper and nitwit, and she isn’t a fool by any reasonable standards. She knows a lot about stock farming and breeding, and there’s not much she doesn’t know about cows and horses, to say nothing of sheep. She can tell a good cow much more surely than Judith can. I like Mrs. Gerald and I think she’s had a damn poor time here. It was a mistake for those two to go on living at Templedean while Judith was still mistress there.”

“Possibly. If they’ve stayed on it was only with one motive, looking forward to the day when they woke up and found themselves monarchs of all they surveyed.”

“Oh, have a heart,” protested Barton. “Gerald’s heir, isn’t he? Waiting for anything is always a bit wearing. Gerald and his wife are in a wretched position here, because inevitably they are waiting. Neither of them can be getting much pleasure out of the situation. With all respect to Miss Vanstead, she doesn’t suffer fools gladly, and she does think Mrs. Gerald is a fool.”

“And Mrs. Gerald is a fool, judged by Judith’s standards. She has neither education, *savoir-faire*, or even passable manners.”

“And just how pleasant is it for Gerald to see his wife summed up like that by the present mistress of Templedean?”

“The Lord knows, I don’t. Provided the fellow gets a sufficiency of gin and whisky, I don’t think he worries overmuch.”

“You’re wrong there, Standish. He drinks too much because he does worry. Incidentally, is there any way of stopping him driving that old car before he kills himself, or somebody else?”

“Good Lord, what do you mean? According to his own estimate, he’s the world’s best driver.”

“He may be a good driver in Queensland or Malaya, I don’t know the conditions out there,” said Barton. “But I do know that he’s very far from a good driver in these lanes on the Cotswold escarpment. He’s an absolute menace, and ‘one for the road’—meaning two or three—doesn’t improve his judgment as a driver.”

“Oh, I know he swills down a double gin before he does anything at all. He keeps a supply of the stuff in his bedroom—but I imagined he’d been in the habit of lowering such a lot of it that it had no effect on him.”

“Too much gin has an effect on anyone. You know the hill coming down from Templedean to Birley Farm, and the rise beyond? Gerald drives down that hill in neutral, with his engine shut off, trusting to the hill beyond to slow him down before he reaches the cross roads—says it saves petrol. If ever he meets a tractor or farm cart on the bend and his brakes fail, there will be an almighty smash. That Stanhall is an old car, and I wouldn’t trust its brakes in any emergency.”

“Have you told him so?”

“By gad, I have. I came down from Templedean with him in the Stanhall, and I tell you I was in an absolute sweat. On a gradient like that one, it’s next to criminal to speed down it. Anyone with any sense comes down in low gear, so that the engine holds the car. I asked him what he expected to happen if any cattle strayed on the road, or if he met a tractor outfit or timber lorry. He just laughed and said he could cope. I swear he couldn’t pull up—the brakes wouldn’t hold.”

“Oh, so that was why he got busy lying on his back in the garage. He flatters himself he’s a skilled mechanic. Annoyed Beach no end, and Beach is a very good chauffeur.”

“If Gerald’s been tinkering with the brake drums, that only makes it worse. Look here, Standish. Tell Miss Vanstead about it. Make her get rid of that old crock of a car. Then he can’t drive it. There’s the Daimler, just doing nothing, and Beach doing nothing too.”

“I don’t see why they should get a new car for Gerald to drive,” said Standish. “He won’t go out in the Daimler with Beach driving, says it gives him the pip to have a chauffeur driving him—and the Morris is Judith’s own car. If we get rid of the Stanhall, Gerald will never go out at all, and the only peace we ever get in the house is when he takes his wife and that querulous kid out with him.”

“But look here, don’t you realise that I mean what I say?” protested Barton. “If Vanstead goes on driving that old car in the way he’s driving it these days, he’ll not only kill himself, he’ll kill somebody else sooner or later, probably sooner.”

“Well, if you feel like that about it, tell Judith so yourself,” replied Standish. “You say you’ve had firsthand experience of Gerald’s driving, which I have not, so it’s up to you to say your piece if you feel so strongly about it.”

“Oh, hang it all, Standish!” protested Barton. “How can I go to Miss Vanstead and tell her that her brother’s a dangerous driver, that he drinks too much before he goes out in the car, and that the car he drives isn’t safe for him to go out in? In any case, she’s got quite enough to worry her at present without having me crying wolf.”

“So you expect me to do the dirty work for you?”

“It’s different for you, Standish. You’re like one of the family. Although I respect Miss Vanstead, and admire her, too, I shouldn’t find it easy to talk to her about her brother. She’d resent it from me.”

“Oh, what a hell of a nuisance the chap is!” cried Standish. “As you say, Judith’s got quite enough to worry about at the moment. If Gerald breaks his neck—well, let him.”

“Damn all, you can’t mean that,” protested Barton soberly, “and you might remember that if he has a smash, it’s pretty certain he won’t be the only casualty. Honestly, I think you ought to do something about it.”

Standish stood still for a moment while he took out his cigarette case and lighted a cigarette. “If there’s one thing that’s more nauseating than anything else, it’s family rows,” he said. “Ever since Gerald and his wife came, life has been one long effort to avoid rows. Every single meal is the same, with that woman looking out for slights and insults. She contradicts other people flatly, with complete disregard of facts. If you prove to her that she’s wrong, she starts nagging her husband to uphold her point. Between us we have evolved a sort of evasion tactics, an absolute refusal to discuss anything with her at all, and thereby we have won a precarious peace. If I do what you suggest, and persuade Judith to get rid of the Stanhall, that will be just another bone of contention. Gerald and his wife like that ghastly old car—he bought it, you know, saying he must have something to drive, though of course Sir Charles paid for it. When we asked Gerald why he chose an outfit like that when there were some quite decent postwar cars at the same auction, he said it was the same as the car he’d had in Malaya and he felt at home with it. So if it’s sold or scrapped, well, that just means another row. And believe me, Judith has had enough rows to put up with.”

Barton rubbed his short fair hair, his face showing the consternation in his mind. “I hadn’t realised it was quite as bad as that,” he said slowly. “I knew things weren’t too easy, but I thought perhaps Miss Vanstead had been a bit too hard on Mrs. Gerald. When I’ve come across her—Mrs. Gerald I mean—she’s seemed glad to talk, and when she talks about stock farming down under she’s jolly interesting. And she’s fond of her husband too. I know he’s what you’d call the fool of the family, but he’s got his points.”

“Maybe he has, but the situation as it stands is almost intolerable. If Gerald goes up in smoke because his crock of a car’s taken away from him, that’ll simply put the lid on it. Think things out for yourself, Barton, in the light of what I’ve told you. The next few weeks are bound to be the hell of a strain for Judith. How would you feel if a father you adored was in the state the old man is now, and coupled to that you had two people in the house simply panting for him to die? I tell you things will be pretty grim, and we don’t want any additional irritations.”

Barton’s fair sun-flushed face looked distressed. “Aren’t you being a bit unfair?” he protested. “Gerald isn’t as heartless as all that. The very fact that he isn’t particularly brainy makes him a kindly sort of chap if you take him the right way.”

“So *you* think. Remember this: Gerald came home here to inherit; every extra month he’s kept out of what he regards as his due position, he gets more jaundiced. . . . You say he’s been pleasant enough to you. I tell you straight that one of the first things he’ll do when he inherits is to boot everybody whom his father employed, and you’ll be one of the first to go. Gerald will manage the estate himself, probably with the assistance of one of his old pals in Malaya—and can’t I see ’em at it!”

Barton stood still and looked at the other man in perplexity, “Do you mean that, Standish? You know how I’m placed——”

“I know you’re meaning to get married after harvest—and good luck to you. But don’t count on having the Home Farm and the estate managership after Sir Charles’s death, because you won’t have it. It’s better for you to know.”

“Hell, that’s a facer,” said Barton. “It never occurred to me . . . I haven’t the capital to buy and equip a farm of my own yet, and I’ve put some work into this one. It’s over twenty per cent more productive than it was when I came. Look at the milk yield . . . and those grass leys . . . and the pigs. . . . They’re the best pigs in the county.”

“I know,” replied Standish, “You’ve worked all out, and you’ve made a damn good job of it, using your brains as well as your brawn. But make no mistake: when the amiable Gerald comes into his own, out you go. The same holds good for everybody who’s worked faithfully for the old man. Beach will go. Saunders, the butler, will go, and Denton, who’s run the gardens since 1919.”

Barton mopped his face. “If you’re right, it’s going to make the hell of a difference to me,” he said. “How can I get married to Elizabeth when I don’t know how I stand? Her people would raise Cain . . . and it wouldn’t be fair to her anyway.”

“My dear chap, I’m sorry, but it’s better for you to know. I’ve heard that precious pair talking. Mrs. Gerald’s got a voice like a foghorn, and when she says they’ll make a clean sweep, she means exactly what she says.”

They had reached the boundary wall of the park, and Barton leant his back against the gate, looking across the rich pasture with a farmer’s eye.

“It seems a bit hard,” he said. “Do you remember the state of this land when old Gray farmed it? All the same, I hope you’ll tell Miss Vanstead what I said about that car.”

“Good for you! I always knew you were an honest bloke. Well, I’ll think about it, but we’ve got enough to bother about at the moment.”

“You’re a cold-blooded chap, Standish. I tell you what, I’ve a good mind to wreck that damned car myself, before I’m tempted to change my mind.”

“That’s up to you. Why not take Beach into your confidence? It’d be easy enough for him to immobilise the thing, and he’d laugh like a hyena when he heard Gerald trying to start it up.”

“That’s an idea,” said Barton. “Anyway, I’m going to do something about it, if you won’t.”

“I never trouble trouble till trouble troubles me,” rejoined Standish.

Chapter 3

1

“A phone call from Templedean Place, madam. They want to get in touch with Miss Vanstead—very urgent, they said, and Lady Allinger has called, madam.”

Miss Alicia Hobart got up from the sofa where she had been resting so peacefully, and sneezed violently as she replied to her aged parlourmaid:

“Oh dear . . . of course I’ll go to the phone. I *do* hope it doesn’t mean— Oh, this wretched hay fever of mine, it’s so upsetting. Ask Lady Allinger to wait, Fenton. Am I very untidy?”

“If you’ll come back here after you’ve answered the phone, madam, I’ll see to you. . . . Very urgent, they said.”

“Oh dear. I’m afraid that can only mean one thing,” said Miss Hobart, making ineffectual adjustments to her grey hair net as she sneezed her way across the hall and hurried to the telephone.

It was several minutes later that Miss Hobart joined Lady Allinger in the drawing room. “Maudie, my dear, I *do* apologise for keeping you like this,” said Miss Hobart. “The most appalling thing—” Her sentence was broken off by an outburst of sneezing, and the only word which Lady Allinger could grasp until the paroxysm was over was “Vanstead.” With great dignity and determination, the Dowager Lady Allinger said:

“Sit down, Alicia, and pull yourself together. Blow your nose hard and make an act of will. If you would only realise that hay fever is ninety per cent nerves you would be able to control it. I suppose you mean that Sir Charles has passed away. I am very sorry to know it, very sorry, but it was not unexpected, and I think your epithet of appalling is quite unsuitable.”

Miss Hobart blew her nose and sat down; possibly she also made the act of will recommended, but she recovered her voice and spoke trenchantly.

“Hay fever has nothing to do with nerves, Maudie. It’s pollen. I am allergic to pollen and you are not. And I did not say that Sir Charles had passed away. Sir Charles is better than anybody dared to hope. I said appalling, and I meant it. It is appalling! Poor Judith, as though she hadn’t troubles enough, and now this. It is too dreadful.”

“Really, Alicia, you are the most maddening woman I know!” declared the dowager, thumping her parasol vigorously on the floor. “Would you kindly tell me to what disaster you are referring?”

Miss Hobart mopped her eyes, whether from grief or hay fever her visitor could not determine. “It’s Gerald Vanstead and his wife,” she said. “In a motor smash. He lost control of his car coming down Templedean Hill and hit the steam roller on the bend. He was killed, and his wife, too. The little boy is still alive. Of all the *appalling* things. . . .”

“A most tragic and shocking thing,” agreed Lady Allinger, “but I am not in the least surprised. Gerald Vanstead was notorious for his reckless driving. Everybody about here has commented on it. I do not wish to be uncharitable but I fear he got exactly what he deserved. I can only hope that he did not kill the driver of the steam roller as well.”

“No, no one else was hurt,” said Miss Hobart. “Really, it seems as though it were *fated*. Three sons . . . and all dead before their father. It’s simply heart-rending. . . .”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Alicia. I grant you that this accident is a most shocking thing—shocking! But to say that it is heart-rending is sheer uncontrolled sentiment. Whose heart is rent, pray? You know as well as I do that all right-minded people about here had the very gravest apprehensions as to what would happen when Gerald inherited Templedean. A most decadent and ill-mannered fellow, and his wife— Well, frankly, she was impossible, and nobody knows it better than you do, Alicia. As a matter of courtesy and decorum I shall express my deep sympathy to Judith and Sir Charles, but with you I can speak my mind. We have known one another for nearly sixty years, Alicia, and though we drive each other mad, at least we can speak truthfully. While I agree that this accident is a shocking and horrifying thing, I do not pretend that it has not simplified a most difficult and unhappy situation.”

“I have no doubt that your reasoning is sound, Maudie—it always has been,” said Alicia Hobart, “but on some occasions reason can be indecent, and this is one of them. Do you realise that both those poor young things were killed instantaneously?”

“If they were to be killed at all, instantaneous death is more merciful than any other,” retorted Lady Allinger, “and as both Gerald and his wife had turned forty, I should not describe them as young things.”

Miss Hobart turned indignantly on her old friend. “You are sixty-eight next month, Maudie, and I am sixty-five. We both remember Gerald as a baby, and I had him here to all the children’s parties——”

“Precisely. So did I,” said Lady Allinger tartly. “He was the greediest small child I ever knew, he cheated at every game he played, and he always howled when he was bowled out. But let that pass. What I should be really interested to learn is when this terrible accident occurred, and who telephoned to you about it.”

“But it happened only just now, about half an hour ago,” said Miss Hobart. “It was the police who telephoned. Maudie, do try to be a little less rational. I really am upset.”

Lady Allinger rose to her feet. She was a tall woman, with a superb Edwardian figure, corseted uncompromisingly in a manner which made her almost architectural. Her flowered black-and-white foulard, her toque (also flowered) and her long-sticked parasol gave her an aspect approaching the regal.

“I shall ring for Fenton, Alicia. A good cup of tea and a tablespoonful of whisky in it is what you need. I have never ceased to envy you because Fenton still parlour maids for you. An elderly servant gal of her type is the rarest creature in the world. Ah, Fenton. Tea, please. Miss Hobart is upset—and a tablespoonful of whisky, Fenton.”

“Yes, my lady,” rejoined the *rara avis*. “I have the tray outside. A very dreadful accident, my lady.”

The tea tray, with its massive Georgian silver, appeared as though by magic, and Lady Allinger superintended the pouring of the tea and the apportionment of the whisky. She then returned to the charge.

“And why, pray, did the police approach you, Alicia?”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? They were trying to find Judith. You see, it was my afternoon for the Cottage Hospital. We usually mend the linen, but today we were going to help clean the dispensary cupboards. They have no proper help, and if it weren’t for voluntary service——”

“Precisely. I know all that, and I admire your charitable disposition, Alicia, but *why*, pray, did the police try to find Judith here because you were supposed to be at the Cottage Hospital?”

“Because my hay fever was so bad, Maudie. Judith drove over after lunch to bring me a new inhalant—I can’t remember the name of it, it is one of those long scientific names—but it was most kind of Judith to think of it, especially when she has so much else to think about, and when I told her I was going to the hospital she said it wasn’t to be thought of when my hay fever was so bad, and she would deputise for me, so she drove off there at half-past two, and the police telephoned here because Judith had left word at Templedean that she was coming to see me.”

“Thank you, Alicia. Now I begin to understand things more clearly. You say that the police telephoned. Do you mean the village constable—I should be justified in saying the village idiot, but one has to pretend to some respect for the appointed representative of the law——”

“Really, Maudie, you are *most* unfair. William Tupper may be slow of speech, but I always find him most courteous and helpful, and he is very good with bees. In any case, it wasn’t Tupper who phoned: it was that nice Sergeant Brown, a most intelligent and sympathetic officer. As I told you, I was very much upset, and he took a lot of trouble to explain.”

“It is the duty of every policeman to take trouble,” rejoined Lady Allinger loftily. “Did he give any explanation of how this lamentable event occurred? Were there any contributory circumstances, or was it all due to reckless driving?”

“Sergeant Brown said the brakes must have failed. Bailey and his lad were on the hill at the time, and saw the car flash past. Gerald was sounding his horn the whole time, poor fellow, so he must have realised that something was wrong. Brown says that if he had turned the car into the bank he might have got off with nothing worse than a bad spill, but I suppose he hoped the road was clear. He hit the steam roller at the bend at the bottom and the car crashed over the hedge.”

“Gerald always hoped for the best, especially when he had no justification for expecting it,” replied Lady Allinger. “I shall telephone to London for a suitable wreath—the local florists are hopelessly inadequate. And now, Alicia, if you take my advice you will go straight to bed, and *will* yourself not to sneeze. One comfort is that Fenton will see to your mourning. It will be a big funeral, and we must all do our best to behave with dignity and decorum.”

Miss Hobart sneezed several times in rapid succession, with vigour and velocity, before she retorted:

“Maudie, I know that you have a heart of gold. I have been told so all my life, but I think you can be the most odious creature I have ever known. I don’t care a damn about wreaths or mourning, but I am sorry about Gerald and Meriel—terribly sorry. I shall have a good cry, and then I shall go over to see Judith and try to comfort her.”

“I can only advise you to do *nothing* of the kind, Alicia. If I had not known that I had measured the whisky with meticulous care, I might have believed it had gone to your head. I will see Fenton as I go out. Aspirin is what you need, and do try to cultivate a sense of proportion.”

2

“I am very sorry to trouble you just now, madam——”

“All right, Sergeant. I know you have to send in a full report.”

Judith Vanstead faced Sergeant Brown with her usual grace and dignity; her face was very pale and her dark eyes heavily shadowed, as though sunk in their deep sockets, but her poise was as steadfast as ever. Brown went on:

“Would you tell me about the car your brother was driving, madam? It was his own car, I see.”

“Yes. He bought it a year ago. When my brother and his wife came to live here with us, I soon realised that he disliked being driven by Beach, our chauffeur, and I use my own little car rather a lot for W.V.S. business, so it seemed sensible for Gerald to have something of his own to drive; as you know, there is no ‘alternative transport’ available. He bought the Stanhall at an auction sale in Oxford, and we teased him for buying such an old crock—it was a 1937 car. But my brother said he liked it because it was the same model he had driven in Malaya before the war, and he felt at home in it. I know he was perfectly satisfied with it.”

“Did you ever hear him say that he had had any trouble with it—the brakes, for instance?”

“No, never. He was a very good mechanic and looked after the car himself. I suggested that Beach should service it for him, but Gerald was most indignant and said he liked to look after his own car.”

“Have you ever heard it said that your brother was a reckless driver, madam?”

A faint colour crept into Judith’s pale cheeks. “No, Sergeant. It is not very likely that anybody would say a thing like that to me about my own brother. One of our neighbours—an elderly lady—once told me that he drove too fast, but as anything over twenty miles an hour means speeding to that lady, I did not take it very seriously. I believe he was a very good driver—he had to drive great distances in Malaya.” Judith paused, her face drawn and frowning. “Have you any idea what caused the accident, Sergeant?”

“Yes, madam, it seems perfectly plain. Mr. Vanstead came down Templedean Hill out of gear; his brakes were faulty, and when he tried to check speed he was unable to do so, the brakes were not properly adjusted.”

“Oh dear . . . yet I am sure I heard him say that he had been over the car himself recently and that it was in perfect order. I know he had it up the elevator thing—our garages are very well equipped. But Beach could tell you.”

“Very good, madam.” The Sergeant looked uncomfortable, as well he might, but he intended to have his report perfectly clear, and he persisted: “It is rather difficult to understand how the brakes were in such a bad condition, madam, if your brother was a good mechanic. Could anybody else have interfered with the car?”

Judith’s frowning face became yet more intent, “Interfered with it? I don’t quite follow you. The Stanhall was always garaged in its own lock-up, and I think my brother always kept the garage doors shut—there is a Yale lock which shuts automatically. I don’t see how anybody could have borrowed the car, if that is what you mean.”

“Very good, madam. Was there anybody who might have had a grudge against your brother and meddled with the car to annoy him, so to speak?”

Judith sat very still, and her steady gaze made Brown flush uncomfortably. “I don’t think we have any irresponsible people in our service here,” she replied. “Beach is over fifty years of age and he has been with us since 1920, save for the time he was directed into National Service during the war. The gardeners don’t go into the garage yard at all, and our only other manservant is Saunders, the butler—a very faithful servant. Nobody here ‘meddled,’ as you put it, and I think it very unlikely that any unauthorised person found his way to the garages. If that is your theory, Sergeant, you must look elsewhere. I suppose it is possible that the car could have been interfered with while it was parked somewhere, but it seems very unlikely to me.”

“Yes, madam, it does to me also,” rejoined Brown. “If your brother always looked after the car himself it looks as though he himself must have been responsible for the state the brakes were in.”

Judith frowned. “Isn’t it possible that the mechanism was defective in itself? Old cars do tend to become faulty. In these days when so many people are driving prewar cars, one is always hearing groans about the cost and difficulty of replacing worn parts. Somebody told me that the metal itself can ‘get tired’; it seems to lose resilience or something.”

Brown nodded. “Yes, madam, I have heard something of the kind myself. There is another point I ought to ask you about Mr. Vanstead’s health. I believe he had a shocking time when he was a prisoner in Malaya.”

“Yes. He had an appalling time,” said Judith. “I don’t think he ever really got over it.”

“Isn’t it possible that his experiences may have affected him more than appeared, madam? Driving a car needs judgment and quick reactions, especially when you are in a dangerous situation. Do you think it possible that his judgment failed, and that he lost his head in a manner of speaking?”

Judith nodded, her eyes very sombre. “I’m afraid that’s what may have happened, Sergeant. Although my brother appeared to be perfectly well and normal, I think it’s possible that his nerve and judgment failed together when he realised what had happened—the car was out of control, and he was unable to make the necessary mental readjustment which might have saved him.”

Brown risked one more question, though he realised that Miss Vanstead looked exhausted and that her own nerves were very much on edge.

“Can you tell me if Mr. Vanstead made a habit of driving down Templedean Hill out of gear, madam?”

Judith made an exasperated sound. “I’m quite certain he did not!” she exclaimed. “I told you he was a good driver. If the car was out of gear, he must have attempted to change down when he realised the brakes had gone. That car needs a double declutch to get down into first gear; he tried it and found it was impossible and had to leave it in neutral.”

“Thank you, madam. I am sorry to have had to trouble you just now. We should all like to express our sympathy with you and Sir Charles. Everybody in the neighbourhood has a very great respect for the family at Templedean Place.”

Judith flushed, and her eyes filled with tears, for the Sergeant’s voice had a genuine ring of kindly feeling.

“Thank you,” she replied. “That was very kindly said, and when one is in trouble, kindness is very helpful.”

Brown mopped his face as he walked sedately over to the garages. “I couldn’t very well ask her if he drank too much,” he said to himself. “The Coroner will have to use his own judgment—but he still reeked of gin when I moved him, and he’d got a flask in his pocket, as well. I’d say that was at the bottom of it—he’d got too much gin inside him.”

The garages, as Judith had told Brown, were in the old stable quadrangle, where loose boxes and carriage stables had been very handsomely adapted for lock-up garages on two sides of the yard. The remaining sides had been turned into living quarters for chauffeur and gardener, “and very nice too,” thought Brown, looking at the mellow stonework and

beautifully painted doors and window frames. The Sergeant knew Beach by sight. The Templedean Place chauffeur was a greyheaded fellow, very smart in his well-cut, bottle-green uniform, but there was something about the man's face which Brown did not like—the rat-trap mouth and suspicious eyes looked very unamiable.

“Edward Beach, chauffeur to Sir Charles Vanstead?” began Brown formally. “You know what I'm here for?”

“I can guess. And I tell you straight I'm not surprised to see you,” said Beach sourly. “Many's the time I've thought this'd be the end of it.”

Brown took out his notebook. “I'm asking you for evidence and I shall take it down in writing,” he said. “Would you like to explain what you mean in your own words?”

“It's simple enough. Sergeant. Mr. Vanstead was a shocking bad driver. He asked for trouble and he got it. Out of respect for Sir Charles and Miss Vanstead I shall try to wrap that up a bit at the Inquest, if I'm called, but that's what it amounts to. You'll find plenty of people to tell you the same.”

“What do you mean by being a bad driver? Deceased had driven for years, hadn't he?”

“Yes. I taught him to drive myself. Nineteen hundred and twenty-two that'd have been. Couldn't get any sense into him, even when he was a boy. He'd never stop to think there were other fools on the road.”

Brown put his notebook down for the moment. “All right. Say if you have a word off the record,” he said. “Have you noticed him driving yourself?—not hearsay, firsthand.”

“He's passed me twice on Templedean Hill when I was off duty, on my bike. I know when a car's in gear. He used to cruise down that hill, trusting to the rise to slow him up, always swearing he hadn't got enough petrol and had to save some doing fool tricks like that there. He drove on his brakes, and on the belief he was the only chap who'd any right on the road. Well, he did it once too often.” The chauffeur paused.

“Petrol, now. Did you fill his tank?”

“Not me. He tried that on, but I wasn't having any. I'm responsible for what goes in the Daimler and Miss Vanstead's Morris, and I wasn't obliging Mr. Vanstead by filling his tank on other people's rations.”

“You clean and service the cars here?”

“The Daimler and the Morris. Not the Stanhall. Never touched it.”

“How's that?”

“Because Mr. Vanstead hated my guts. That's why he wouldn't have me drive him in the Daimler. I spoke a few plain words to him when he was a boy, for his own good, and he's never forgiven me. He once took Sir Charles's Mercedes out—1923 that was—and he piled it up against the posts of the entrance gates. A lovely car that was—sheer wanton stupidity. Quite a lot I said, and I told Sir Charles what I'd said, too, and he upheld me. Oh no, I never so much as cleaned that Stanhall—thank God! You can't lay his death at my door. See that—garage number three?”

Beach waved towards a closed door. “That's Mr. Vanstead's lock-up. Lock-up's the word. He was so suspicious he locked that door every time he took the car out. Thought I'd pinch his tools, I suppose. And I've been employed here since 1920, barring the time I was in the aeroplane works.”

“Then you can't tell me anything about the condition of the Stanhall?”

“Not through looking at it or working on it. I heard it. A chap's got ears. That was quite a good car when he bought it—engine ran nicely. It got worse every week he drove it. Ask

Elliott over at the Crossroads Garage; he'll tell you how many jobs he's done rewelding and taking dents out of the wings and respraying. Mr. Vanstead couldn't do those jobs himself."

"Umps," said the Sergeant. "That's quite a point. Now, between ourselves—did he drink?"

Beach looked disgusted. "Sozzled. I'm a teetotaller myself. Don't hold with drinking in my job. He didn't often speak to me, but when he did he stank of spirits, and so did his wife."

"Miserable business," said Brown sadly. "Of course the Japs knocked hell out of him—I daresay that explains it. Were you here when Mr. Vanstead took his car out this afternoon?"

"No. I was digging in my garden. Miss Vanstead went out in her own car at two o'clock. She told me I shouldn't be wanted and could do some gardening if I liked. She knows I'm keen on gardening, and there's not much chauffeuring for me to do just now. Very considerate lady, Miss Vanstead."

"Everyone respects her, I know that. Look here, Beach. What sort of mechanic was Mr. Vanstead?"

"Not for me to say, because I don't know, but you've seen the result of his tinkering. Always mucking about with that car, he was."

"Is there a spare key to that lock-up?"

Beach stared. "Can't say. If there is, I've never seen it."

"Ever seen any unauthorised persons around here?"

"No. Not at any time."

Brown shut his notebook. "Very good. That'll do for now. I'll get a statement typed out with your evidence that you had nothing to do with the Stanhall and you can sign it. As for your opinions—well, wait and see if the Coroner asks for them."

"That's about it," agreed Beach.

Chapter 4

1

“Accidental death. It was the only reasonable verdict they could have brought in, according to the evidence which you and Sergeant Brown collected, Young.”

The Chief Constable spoke thoughtfully. He was very well aware of the fact that Inspector Young and Sergeant Brown felt far from satisfied. They had been commended by the Coroner for the care they had taken in providing every possible item of relevant evidence, and both men had good reason to feel a little complacent, but they both looked glum and nonplussed.

Colonel Waine, the Chief Constable, was a conscientious official; further, he had a real regard for the men in the County Force under his jurisdiction, just as he used to have a regard for every man in his battalion. He knew that Young was a first-rate police officer and that Brown was an intelligent and painstaking sergeant, and Waine wanted to know exactly what was in their minds. Turning to the Sergeant, the Colonel said:

“What’s the trouble, Brown? Let’s have it, as plain as you like. Deceased lived in your district and you have some firsthand knowledge of most of the people concerned, so you can bat first.”

Brown spoke slowly. “There’s something I don’t like about the set-out, sir. This Mr. Gerald Vanstead—well, he wasn’t popular, and that’s putting it mildly. You’d be hard put to it to find anyone hereabouts who really liked him, and there’s a few hated him. His death—well, it’s brought advantages to quite a few, and disadvantages to nobody.”

Brown paused, and the Inspector took up the tale. “That’s all true enough, sir, but the point which worries me is this: it’d have been so easy. As Brown says, everyone in the place knew the way deceased drove that car; everyone knew it was an old car and that he wouldn’t let the chauffeur at Templedean Place touch it, and nobody believed that deceased was to be trusted to look after his car any more than he could be trusted to drive it with reasonable caution.”

“I couldn’t enter hearsay as evidence,” went on Brown, “but I know it’s true that they had a bet on in the bar at The Crown that Mr. Vanstead would have a spill on that hill before the year was out, and when it happened, they all said, ‘Just what we expected.’”

“Very good. What both of you feel is this: that if anybody wanted to get rid of Mr. Vanstead, the means was plain—meddle with the brake drums on his car and the result was a foregone conclusion.”

“Yes, sir, but there’s more to it than that,” said Brown, “It was generally known that Mr. Vanstead drove into Stowe every fortnight, always on a Thursday afternoon, and he called in at The Barley Mow for tea coming back. I can’t prove it, but I think he had an arrangement with the licensee to pick up his quota of gin and whisky. Anyway, he always went on the first and third Thursdays in the month, though no one would state that fact in the witness box. Now his brakes failed on a day it was known he would be taking his car out, and the very day when the steam roller got going at the bottom of the hill.”

“In addition to that, Beach, the chauffeur, *knew* the steam roller would be working there that afternoon, because he saw the thing arrive the previous evening when he was out on his bike,” added Young, “and the verdict was accidental death, and we can’t get beyond it.”

Colonel Waine turned to Brown. “This man, Beach—you know him, Sergeant?”

“To pass the time of day with, sir. I’ve never had any official dealings with him—no need to. He’s got a clean licence, never even been summonsed. He’s a first-rate driver and a very careful one. He’s a teetotaler and goes to Chapel regular—as respectable a chap as you ever saw. He’s not a gossip; in fact, he’s known for keeping his mouth shut, but he’s always polite and got a pleasant word. He’s fifty-five and been with the Vansteads for years, and the aeroplane works manager said he was a tiptop mechanic. And Mr. Gerald Vanstead hated him so much he wouldn’t even let him clean the Stanhall. Never spoke to him.”

Inspector Young spoke meditatively: “Fifty-five, got a soft job, big wages, and lovely quarters. Comfortable’s not the word—and a very nice garden too. When Mr. Gerald Vanstead inherited, he’d have put paid to all that. Beach would have been lucky if he’d had a week’s grace to get his things out. Now a good mechanic of fifty-five could get another job all right—lots of jobs in industry for a tiptop mechanic—but very few cushie jobs as chauffeur with the sort of money and quarters he got at Templedean.”

The Chief Constable faced Young squarely. “You believe that Beach was responsible for the Stanhall brakes failing?”

Young hesitated. “If you’re asking for my opinion, sir, yes, I do. But I’ve no evidence. Also, Beach wasn’t the only one who profits by that accident. There’s several other people sitting pretty who weren’t feeling all that happy a week ago.”

Brown spoke disgustedly. “The Templedean Place party came to the Inquest in the Daimler, Beach driving. Lovely that car looked, fair shining. And Beach all as smart as a Guardee, holding the door open, saluting. . . . Thank you. Beach. Very good, Beach. . . . Oh, he’s the cat’s whiskers.”

Colonel Waine chuckled—he couldn’t help it; then he went on: “You say that deceased hated Beach. Now Beach spoke quite frankly in the witness box, and said that he’d taught Gerald Vanstead to drive years ago, and had a lot of trouble over it, ending up with what he called a few plain words when young Gerald wrecked his father’s Mercedes, but you’ve also got to remember that Mr. Walter Vanstead remembered those circumstances and said that Beach was entirely justified, for the boy had taken the Mercedes out without permission.”

“Quite true, sir,” said Young, “but isn’t Mr. Walter Vanstead one of those who’s sitting pretty, if you’ll allow me to put it that way? He came to live at Templedean Place in 1940, when the bombing started. He’s very comfortable there, to put it mildly, and he, at least, made no attempt to disguise the fact that he disliked both deceased and his wife. He also said to me that his nephew was a sullen chap who harboured old grudges, and that he’d never forgiven Beach for the way the latter ticked him off years ago.”

Colonel Waine frowned. “Look here. Young. I’m quite willing to consider a possible case against an individual—Beach, for example. But I am not willing to consider any ideas of a general collaboration in crime unless you have any specific evidence which points to it.”

Young faced the Chief Constable squarely. “As you know, sir, I put in every bit of evidence which could be called evidence. I couldn’t put in hearsay, and I couldn’t put in the sort of gossip which has been going on in the locals, because none of the gossips would come into the open and make a statement in the presence of a reliable witness, but I know that Brown is right when he says that it was common gossip that Gerald Vanstead got up against his family and was on bad terms with his uncle and that secretary chap, Standish. I’m not suggesting that anybody at the house aided or abetted Beach, or that they believe he had anything to do with making that car unsafe, but it is true that Beach seems in favour, and that Mr. Walter Vanstead and Mr. Standish don’t look any too down in the mouth.” Young paused,

and then added: “You asked us what the trouble was, sir, straight out. We’ve tried to tell you. We’ve got nothing to add in the way of evidence, it’s just the feel of the thing. And Mr. Gerald Vanstead’s death was advantageous to more people than one.”

The Chief Constable meditated, pinching his ear, a sure sign that he was disturbed. He had asked for it, and he had got it, and these two men were conscientious and reliable officers.

“Very well, Young. You’ve got it off your chest. Any suggestions to make?”

“So far as I can see, sir, there isn’t a thing we can do about it. All the evidence about the lock-up where the Stanhall was kept was indisputable. Mr. Vanstead had the key and he kept the door locked; even when he took the car out, he shut the garage door behind him.”

“That struck me as damned odd,” said the Colonel thoughtfully. “Why give himself all that trouble? I can understand him locking the door when he put the car away, but why lock an empty garage? Was there anything valuable in it?”

“There were some packing cases, mostly filled with old junk, stuff he’d salvaged from his office in Malaya, I believe. It can’t have been valuable, or he’d have had it taken up to the house,” said Young. “There were some tools—the usual sort of thing—a spare tin of oil and a two-gallon tin of petrol.”

“I reckon he locked the door to annoy Beach,” said Brown. “Show everybody he didn’t trust him.”

“And Vanstead kept the key of the garage on the same ring as his ignition key, and always carried them in his pocket,” said Waine. “Was there any other key to that lock-up, Young?”

“Yes, sir. Miss Vanstead found it, with a lot of other spare keys, in her father’s desk. But that lock was put on the door over twenty-five years ago.”

“And you think the probability is that Beach had duplicates to all the garage doors?” asked the Colonel.

Young simply shrugged his shoulders, but his implication was plain enough: was it likely that a chauffeur who had worked in the same place all those years wouldn’t have his own keys to each lock-up? After all, until Gerald Vanstead had appeared on the scene, Beach had had sole control and responsibility in the garage yard.

“It’s difficult, Young, very difficult,” said the Chief Constable. “We don’t want to make a stink unjustifiably, and if it’s once known that we’re still working on this case, it’s going to let loose the hell of a lot of surmise.”

Brown almost snorted. “I don’t reckon you need worry too much about that, sir. The Coroner’s verdict isn’t going to stop the gossip that’s going around. The Inspector and myself aren’t the only ones who’re wondering.”

“Is that so?” enquired the Chief Constable innocently. “Well, there’s no harm in your listening, Brown, and reporting, if there’s anything to report. We can’t have slander in our area.”

Thus encouraged, Brown went on: “I’ve sometimes found that folks are more willing to discuss things, friendly-like, after a verdict’s been given. The chap I’d like a heart to heart with is Mr. Barton, at the Home Farm. He knows the household at Templedean Place, but he’s not part of it, and I’d say he’s got a pretty shrewd judgment.”

“Well, I see no harm in that,” said the Colonel. “You’ve got a head on your shoulders, Brown, and you know your own rules. Provided you stick to them, I’ll back you, but don’t let me hear you’re going beyond your duty.”

“No, sir. Very good, sir,” replied Brown promptly.

Waine turned to Young, a query in his face, and the Inspector replied to the unspoken question. “We’ve got a pretty good record in your area, sir. On the few occasions when we’ve had real criminal work to tackle, I reckon we got at the facts and made a true bill, and I’m proud of it. This is the first time I haven’t been satisfied, and I don’t like it.”

Waine chuckled. “Buttering me up, Young, eh? Well, I’ve had every reason to trust you in the past, and I’ll trust you now. You don’t want any reminders from me that this is the sort of job can break a man if he handles it wrongly.”

“I know that, sir,” rejoined Young ruefully.

2

Sudden death, inquest and rumour may have occupied the minds of the country folk, but they had no effect on farm work. Hay time started in blazing weather and the shining swathes of flowering grasses scented the air as they dried swiftly and sweetly under a true June sun. Hay time brings joy and satisfaction, but it means gruelling hard work: the tractors were out soon after five in the morning, and loads of hay were being led until the long twilight faded, close on midnight. Gilbert Barton, face and neck and arms scorched strawberry red under his fair thatch of hair, worked among his men with a will. He was a skilful loader and threw up the great swathes of hay with an apparent ease which many a younger man might have envied. Taking a moment’s easy, as the laden waggon moved off, Gilbert looked across the meadowland of the park and saw that a small car had pulled up on the road to the house, and that someone was alighting. Recognising Judith Vanstead, Barton mopped his face and walked across to meet her. She looked cool and pleasant in a light tussore silk suit, and she moved across the cut grass with a deliberate graceful swing.

“I’m so glad you’ve got fine weather for hay time, Mr. Barton. It’s a wonderful crop this year, isn’t it? Everybody is saying that your hay is the finest for miles, but I know it means very long hours and heavy work.”

“I don’t think anyone is grouching about that, Miss Vanstead. They’re a fine lot of men—especially the old ones—and they’re as proud of it as I am. Even the cows know the hay’s especially good this year: they leave their pasture to steal the hay as the waggons pass, and that speaks volumes.” He paused, and then said diffidently: “I haven’t had a chance to tell you how sorry I was for all the distress you have suffered: I did feel for you, and for your father, very deeply.”

“Thank you very much. I can’t tell you how kind everyone has been, but—it was just awful.” She bent her head, and Barton could see the tears on her dark lashes. “Poor Gerald—he’d had such a horrible time, and I do grieve so much because we didn’t make up for it more. It was all so difficult, and somehow I couldn’t get onto real terms with him.” She hesitated, and then added: “I can say this to you, because I believe you liked him: you did manage to make friends with him and I wanted to tell you how glad I was. I know a lot of people didn’t like him and his wife, but you got to know them somehow. I suppose it’s because your job is so—real, it makes you real too.”

“An honest feeling for the land and the beasts is a never-failing source of understanding between people who share it,” he said simply. “I think Mrs. Vanstead was a good farmer, and I liked her for it.”

“I shall always remember that with gratitude,” she answered. “You did something I failed to do. I was often horrid to her, and I’m ashamed when I think of it. But I know it’s no use

getting morbid over it. The only thing I can do to make up is to see that Alan has the best chance possible to grow up sturdy and strong, and to do all the things he's got the ability to do—poor little boy!”

“Indeed, poor little chap!” replied Barton. “How is he, Miss Vanstead?”

“Better, I think. I got Ardenly, the psychiatrist, to see him. He advised sending Alan away for a bit, to a woman who is trained to deal with cases of shock and maladjustment. Later on, he's going to a school Mr. Ardenly recommended. It seemed the kindest and wisest thing to do. Alan will get over it more easily when he's away from everything which reminded him of it. At the moment, he's haymaking too—I hope.”

“Good! I think you were very wise over that, and I'm sure it's better for him.”

“Perhaps when he does come back here, you will be able to help—keep him out of doors, and let him learn to ride and drive. Mr. Barton, I've only recently heard that you're engaged and going to get married. I'm so very glad. I've often thought you needed a wife to look after you in that great old farmhouse. I do hope you'll both be very happy. I want to meet your fiancée and go over the farmhouse with her; I'm certain an awful lot needs doing inside to make it more comfortable and easier to run.”

Gilbert Barton's face lit up. “But that's awfully good of you, Miss Vanstead.”

“It isn't good at all. I hope you realise that my father knows just how much you've improved the land and the stock. Last time he was talking about the estate he said to me, ‘Barton's a good farmer and a good manager. We ought to get him settled on a permanent basis, for our interest as well as his.’ As things turned out, I couldn't go into it as Father wished, but I can now. You must see the estate lawyer sometime and talk it over, but may I just say that I want you to regard yourself as a ‘freeholder,’ if you know what I mean. We want you to settle here, and of course the house must be brought up to date and made charming for your bride.”

“I don't ask anything better than to stay here,” said Gilbert Barton. “It's good land and you've been generous over equipping and stocking it, and in giving me a free hand in working it. If I'd had to leave here, I should have felt that I'd left part of myself behind——” He broke off, and Judith said quickly:

“The thought of leaving it needn't arise, need it, then? It's to our interest that you should stay, and we hope it's to yours as well. I mustn't keep you now, but do remember what I said about the house. It would be sensible if I went over it with your fiancée, and she can tell me exactly what she would like to have done. After all, if you agree to become a fixture, so to speak, you've got to remember that your wife has a right to a say in the matter.”

She smiled at him, her dark eyes serious for all her smiling lips, and Barton replied: “Of course she has, but I know what she will feel about it. She loves this place already—even the old farmhouse, with the bath in the wash house and oil stoves and lamps.”

Judith laughed. “Is it as bad as that? I didn't know. Tell her—I don't even know her name.”

“Elizabeth—Elizabeth Coombe.”

“Then tell your Elizabeth we'll have electricity and proper plumbing put in, and she can have it painted from top to bottom. Oh, here's Mr. Standish, come to lend you a hand. I must get out of your way. Good-bye for now, and good luck.”

She turned away quickly, as though to evade Barton's thanks, and an empty waggon pulled up beside him as Standish said: “Got a spare fork? I might as well sweat some weight off. Tick me off if I make a nuisance of myself.”

The sun had set at last, and the cooling fragrant air was a boon to the haymakers; thrushes and blackbirds sang from the treetops, as though vying with one another in long-drawn-out song; the larks overhead made a background of never ceasing melody, while swallows and martins cut marvellously through the air catching flies for their supper. Standish mopped his brow and rested on his fork.

“Gad, it’s worth sweating. This is about the best hour of the day.”

Barton nodded, “And it’s been a damn’ good day too. The loft in the tithe barn’s packed roof high, and I’ve never seen better hay. Standish, was it you who told Miss Vanstead I wanted to get married?”

“I did—no offence meant. I also told her that house of yours could do with a bit of modernising.”

“Jolly decent of you.”

“Nothing of the kind. As it happens, Miss Vanstead has never been over the house. Old Gray was there for half a lifetime, and when you took over, things were upset because of Sir Charles’s illness, but Miss Vanstead would have a fit at the thought of your bride coming to the house in its present condition. She’s very sound over that sort of thing.” Lighting a cigarette, Standish added: “I told her some little while ago that you hoped to get married, but—well, it just wasn’t possible to do anything then. For all we knew, you might have got notice to quit; but that’s all over, thank God, and you can count on security of tenure and decent conditions.”

Barton’s fair flushed face looked troubled. “I can’t help wishing it hadn’t come the way it did,” he said. “It was a rotten business, poor devil.”

“No use getting morbid over it,” said Standish. “Anyway, better a quick passing than living on as a cripple. In any case, he could never have made anything of life here, and I think he knew it.”

Barton turned quickly and looked at the other man. “What do you mean?”

“Well, in confidence, I couldn’t help wondering if that accident wasn’t intentional. I can trust you to keep your mouth shut, Barton, but he’d been having hell from his wife. She nagged at him, wanting him to turn all this up and take her back to Queensland. Gerald had got some relics of decent feeling, devotion to his father, and loyalty to his inheritance. It seems to me he may have just cracked up. Drank too much, got melancholy mad—and then—that.”

“Good God! How appalling!” exclaimed Barton, but Standish put in quickly:

“It’s only surmise, mark you. I wouldn’t say this to anyone else, and I was thankful to high heaven that the suggestion never cropped up at the Inquest, but I’ve watched Gerald. Admittedly I disliked him, but I couldn’t help realising his nerves were all to hell, and as I say, his wife never gave him any peace. So far as he’s concerned, I daresay he’s better out of it. He could never have coped with the sort of responsibilities involved if he’d inherited. Curiously enough, Sir Charles felt like that over it. Judith had to tell him, and she dreaded it. All he said was: ‘Perhaps it’s for the best. Gerald could never face reality.’ Amazing old man—he still goes straight to the point in any problem.”

Standish ground out the stub of his cigarette under his heel. “Don’t feel hipped about it, Barton. One man’s death is proverbially another man’s opportunity. You’ve got your opportunity to do the thing you care about, to farm under good conditions. Later on, maybe, I

may be able to lend you a hand. I'm interested in line breeding. If you set out to build up your own pedigree herd, there'll be the deuce of a lot of recording and paper work. You can count me in on that—practical genetics.”

“By gad, I'll hold you to that sometime, Standish. It's what I've always wanted to do.”

“Right. We might make a start by going to the Royal Show. I've always wanted to bid for some top-line stock.”

Barton's face had lost its melancholy. “The Royal Show? Glory, what a thought . . . by heck, Standish, what a thought. . . .”

Chapter 5

1

“Good evening, Mr. Barton. Could you spare me a minute?”

Gilbert Barton found Inspector Young in the fold yard when he (Barton) came home for a hurried supper at eight o'clock the following evening. The farmer was going out again later, for the full moon would make it possible to go on loading the hay until after eleven o'clock that midsummer evening, and the last thing Barton wanted to do was to waste time talking.

“Well, you know how it is with us, Inspector: if you like to come in while I'm bolting my supper, do, but I've got another three hours' work to do, carting. However, come in. A glass of cider? I'm as dry as a lime kiln.”

He led the way into the great stone-flagged kitchen, where his supper was laid on the scrubbed table—home-cured ham, salad and tomatoes and an earthenware jug of cider. Barton fetched another glass from the dresser and filled it, pushing it over to the Inspector, who apologised for “butting in” during hay time.

“All right, you've got your job to do, I know that,” replied Barton, “and I'm hardly in the house between dawn and dusk these days. What's the trouble?”

He sat down and began to carve the ham, and Young said:

“No trouble, Mr. Barton. I just wanted a word with you about Joe Dyke. I believe he worked for you at one time.”

“Joe? Yes, of course he did. I took him on from the hostel at Stanford, as you probably know. He's a mental defective: can't count, or read or write, but he's a good milker and clever with a scythe. I was sorry he went. I hope he hasn't been getting into mischief.”

“So do I. You'll have heard there was a fire in the Britling plantation, and another in Mr. Welby's rick yard? They may have been accidental—or not. We're looking into it. Somebody reported that Joe Dyke had been seen on the plantation.”

Barton snorted. “Why shouldn't he have been? There's a right of way there. If anybody has suggested that Joe has been fire raising, tell them to go and boil their heads. Joe didn't do it. He's terrified of fire—wouldn't even strike a match. I believe he lost his parents in a fire when he was a nipper, and he's been frightened of fire ever since.”

“Well, I'm glad to have your opinion about it, Mr. Barton. How did you find him, easy to deal with?”

“Perfectly easy. Very biddable, almost docile; always cheerful and a good worker, provided you remembered his mental age was about nine years old. Mrs. Davis looked after him—the wife of my head cowman. She treated him like a child, kept him clean and looked after his clothes and all that.”

“What reason did he give for leaving you, if I may ask?”

“Said he wanted a change. Mr. Hailsham, over at Butts End, was very shorthanded—the boy's just gone into hospital—and he was only too glad to have Joe. Whether Hailsham put it into the boy's head that he should make a move I don't know, but I knew Hailsham was in difficulties, so I agreed that Joe should go. He's living in the house there and well looked after. What does Hailsham say about this suggestion of fire raising?”

“Well, he didn’t like to give an opinion, not having known the boy for long. Mr. Hailsham says Dyke is a natural, but a good worker for all that. Incidentally, Mr. Barton, Joe Dyke did give Mr. Hailsham his reason for wanting to leave Templedean. He was frightened of Mr. Gerald Vanstead. Seems the latter swore at the lad for something and frightened him out of his wits, such as they are.”

Barton looked surprised. “It’s the first I’ve heard of it, but it’s possible. Mr. Vanstead was no good at dealing with the farm workers here—wanted to treat them all as he treated his native boys in Malaya.”

He broke off abruptly, and saw that Young was regarding him steadily. “That’s an exaggeration, of course,” said the farmer hastily, but Inspector Young put in:

“Is it? I should say it about hit the nail on the head.”

There was a sudden silence between the two men, and then Young said: “The Britling plantation is Templedean property?”

“Yes. What about it?” demanded Barton impatiently. “You don’t imagine Joe Dyke is nursing thoughts of revenge, do you? If so, forget it. The lad forgets things as fast as they happen.”

“He may do, but other chaps may have longer memories, Mr. Barton. Between you and me, and I’m speaking unofficially, mind you, there were more folks had reason to be glad of Mr. Vanstead’s accident than there were to regret it.”

Barton looked steadily at the Inspector. “You had a full enquiry, Inspector, and you got a plain verdict. Isn’t that good enough?”

“Officially, yes; unofficially, I can’t get it out of my mind. I hate these obvious cases. I wouldn’t say so to everybody, but I’m not afraid of speaking my mind to you.”

Barton finished his glass of cider, pushed his plate back, and lighted a cigarette. “I won’t pretend that I don’t know what you mean, Inspector, because I do, but I remind you again, you had a full enquiry. And if you go chasing motives, you’ll have to bear in mind that I was one of those who profited by Vanstead’s death. If he’d inherited, it’s likely I should have lost my job here, and I’m dead keen on this job. What’s true of me is true of others, and we both know it.”

“Admitted.” Young got to his feet, adding: “You want to get on with your haymaking, and I won’t hinder you, but, speaking as man to man, if you’d been in my place, could you have put the whole thing out of your head, verdict or no verdict? Weren’t there too many people who had reason to give a sigh of relief and say ‘That’s fine’?”

“Yes, but——” Barton broke off, and the other said:

“All right. We’ll leave it at that for now, but I’d give a lot to have a straight talk with you sometime, Mr. Barton. I’ve got an idea you could put a few doubts out of my head, just as you did over this lad, Dyke. What you say about his being afraid of fire makes a lot of difference.”

“Well, you can get that corroborated from the Institution. There’s no malice in Joe, and for a natural he’s a steady-going lad. Well, I must be off to help my chaps. I gave them half an hour for a bite, and what’s good enough for them is good enough for me.”

It was a fortnight later that Gilbert Barton saw Young again. Hay time was over, but the fine weather still held, and farmers were worrying over the effects of the drought on their root crops and corn. Barton had been looking at a field of oats, assessing the probable yield, and

the certain shortage of straw. Just as he came out of the gate on to the road, he saw the police car drawn up behind his own and Young came towards him.

“Reckon you’ll have to pay for your good hay time with a thin harvest, Mr. Barton?”

“Looks like it. Always the same in farming. If we could get a week’s steady rain now . . .”

Young came and joined him at the gate. “My father was a farmer, so I’ve heard that one before. Those are good oats compared with a lot I’ve seen hereabouts.”

“And damned bad compared with what they might be,” said Barton. “Well, I’ve had many a heart to heart leaning over a gate, so what about it?”

“Nothing wrong about a gate provided you make certain there’s nobody the other side of the hedge,” replied Young.

“You can make your mind easy about that; I’ve just been along by the hedge row,” replied Barton.

“Very good, I’ll take your word for it. Now I wonder if you remember having a chat with Mr. Standish by that gate in the Templedean wall, the east wall, I mean. The week before Mr. Vanstead’s accident it was, one Friday morning.”

Barton stared. “Yes—I think I remember; but how do you know about it?”

“By listening to the gossip that goes on. There’s a sight too much gossiping, and malicious at that, hereabouts. When you were talking to Mr. Standish, you didn’t notice that the telephone line was under repair. There was a mechanic on a ladder working at the telephone post by the yew tree, not a couple of yards from your gate where you were talking. He couldn’t see you and you couldn’t see him, but according to his own account he could hear all that you and Mr. Standish said.”

“Good lord!” exclaimed Barton, his fair face flushing angrily. “Do you mean he went to you and repeated what he heard, or thought he heard? If so, I hope you ticked him off—spying and eavesdropping. He ought to lose his job for it.”

“No use getting angry about it, Mr. Barton. Human nature’s human nature, and if a chap like that is in a position to overhear an interesting conversation, he’ll listen all right. And he didn’t come to me to repeat what he’d heard. He told one of his mates about it and a garbled version is going the rounds of the bar parlours. Sergeant Brown got wind of it, and he reported to me, as it was his duty to do. Now I’ve come to you unofficially, Mr. Barton. Are you willing to tell me what was actually said in the course of that conversation? If I know the truth, then I can deal with the rumours.”

Barton rumbled up his thatch of hair—fair and bleached like the thatch of his own hay ricks. “I can’t do that, Inspector. It was a private conversation, and maybe both Standish and I said a bit more than was discreet. I can’t quote him, not without his permission, anyway.”

“Are you willing to answer a few questions, then, Mr. Barton? I tell you straight, it’s a matter of answering them here, unofficially, or with witnesses and a lot of palaver elsewhere. You see, I know you and I trust you. If you can convince me this mechanic chap is exaggerating, well, I can deal with it myself. But I can’t let it pass without going into it.”

Barton leaned on the gate, evidently deep in thought. At last he replied: “That’s fair enough, Young. I know you, too, and I think we can get things straight between us. It’s very decent of you to tackle it this way.”

“I never go out of my way to make trouble, especially for people I respect,” replied Young, and there was sincerity in his voice. “You’re not native to this place, but we all know you’re a good farmer, and you’re liked and respected by the men who work for you and the tenants you deal with. You’ve a name for being straight, Mr. Barton, and I’m being straight

with you. Now, in the course of that conversation, was the Templedean chauffeur mentioned—Beach?”

“Yes, he was, several times. I’ve got to think this out, Young. I may not tell you everything that Standish and I said. You’ve got to remember he was talking to me in confidence, and I to him, blowing off steam if you like to put it that way. But whatever I tell you will be true, and I won’t go back on it, witnesses or no witnesses. I told Standish that in my opinion Gerald Vanstead was a dangerous driver, and I suggested he should advise Miss Vanstead to get rid of the Stanhall altogether. There was the Daimler, doing nothing—why not let Beach drive Gerald and his wife in that? Standish replied, ‘He says it gives him the pip to be chauffeur-driven.’ That was one mention of Beach. The next, if I remember aright, was Standish saying that when Gerald Vanstead inherited he’d make a clean sweep of all the Templedean employees, including chauffeur, gardeners and butler—also including me. Don’t forget that last bit. I’m in on this, Young, and I’ll ask you to bear it in mind.”

“Very good, Mr. Barton.” Young grinned. “Mr. Gerald Vanstead has been overheard on this subject. ‘Clean sweep’ was a favourite phrase of his.”

“Poor devil!” said Barton. “I know he was a fool, but I was sorry for him. It must have been the hell of a life for him and his wife up at Templedean. They weren’t cut to the intellectual pattern. I believe I said something of the kind to Standish. Now about Beach . . . Yes, he was mentioned again. Standish said he couldn’t worry Miss Vanstead about the Stanhall, she’d got enough worry and to spare already. She’s devoted to her father, you know, and this business about another operation has cut her up badly—it’s an agonising thing, having the old man hacked about again. Well, I saw what Standish meant, and I think I said ‘I’ve a good mind to take the Stanhall out and wreck it myself; then he can’t drive it,’ and Standish said: ‘Get Beach to co-operate. He could immobilise the thing as easy as say-so.’ That’s the essentials of the conversation, and I’m pretty sure I’ve remembered everything we said about Beach.”

“Thank you, Mr. Barton. And did you have a talk with Beach?”

“No, Young, I didn’t. I rather wish I had. After all I’d said to Standish about Vanstead’s driving, I thought I’d done enough. I expect you know how it was. I was honestly worried about the fool way he drove—I thought he’d kill somebody before he’d done—but once I’d got it off my chest by telling someone else about it, I cooled down a bit and wondered if I’d been making too much fuss.”

“I wish you’d reported to us, sir. If you’d only told the Sergeant he’d have watched out and warned Mr. Vanstead. A reckless driver will often take a police warning when he won’t listen to his friends.”

“I wish I had, Young—and believe me or believe me not, I did think of doing so. Only it wasn’t easy. The Vansteads are my employers, and it’s not easy to report your boss to the local police. It goes against the grain.”

“You ought to have done it, all the same,” said Young. “As you know, the chaps in the force can’t be everywhere at once, and they didn’t spend much time over the traffic on Templedean Hill; it’s mainly used by the cars from the Place. However, it’s no use crying over spilt milk. Now there’s another point—getting back to that conversation of yours with Mr. Standish. The telegraph linesman reported him as saying that they were all quarrelling like Kilkenny cats up at the Place, and there wouldn’t be any peace in the house while Gerald Vanstead was living there and the sooner he broke his neck the better for everybody. Now is that a fair interpretation of what was said, Mr. Barton?”

“No,” rejoined the farmer, “it is not. What Standish did say was that they were all trying their best to avoid arguments. You know what family parties can be like, Young. Gerald had never got on well at home, and his Australian wife didn’t cotton onto her husband’s people. In addition to this, there was the nervous tension caused by Sir Charles’s state of health. The result was that everybody was irritable, and Standish, who likes peace and quietness, blamed Gerald and his wife for disturbing the quiet atmosphere of the place. He couldn’t let off steam to any of the Vansteads, so he poured it all out to me, the pent-up irritation of a rather nervy academic fellow. There was nothing more to it than that.”

“Did Mr. Standish say anything to the effect that ‘the sooner he breaks his neck the better’?”

“No, he didn’t,” said Barton stoutly. “When I said, ‘He’ll break his neck if he goes on driving like that,’ Standish said, ‘Who the hell cares?’ or words to that effect. I’ve said the same sort of thing myself when I got mad about somebody, and I bet you have, too, at one time or another, Young.”

“Aye. Maybe I have, but as it happens the chaps I’ve said it about didn’t oblige by killing themselves a few days later. That makes a difference,” said the Inspector dryly.

Barton took out his cigarette case and offered it to Young, who took a cigarette and produced a match. After a deep breath of smoke, Barton turned to the other, facing him full. “What exactly are you getting at, Young?”

“I think I’ve told you, off the record, so to speak,” replied the Inspector. “As you said, we had a full enquiry and we had a plain verdict. Speaking as a policeman, it was finished and done with. But a policeman’s just like any other chap: we worry about our job, those of us who’ve got a conscience. Something’s been nagging away inside my mind about this case, and now there’s all this gossip.”

“Why in blazes come to me about it?” burst out Gilbert Barton. “You know perfectly well that I’m one of those who profited by Gerald Vanstead’s death. I didn’t want to be kicked out of a farm I was just beginning to get into decent order. Farming’s a long-term job—you don’t see your results until a long time after you’ve got a plan established. I wanted to stay here, and I make no bones about saying so.”

“I know all that,” rejoined Young placidly. “Come to think of it, what I’m doing isn’t any too regular, but you asked me why I came to you. I told you I’d got a conscience. Well, I reckon you have, too, Mr. Barton. In addition to that, I can talk to you. You may not agree with the way I’m going about things, but you understand what’s in my mind all right.” He paused, and then added: “Now there’s this business of the linesman who listened in on your conversation. I’m going to tackle the chap sometime, but I wanted to hear what you’d got to say about it first.”

“That’s fair enough,” said Barton. “Look here—say if you get the chap along to your office sometime, listen to what he’s got to say, and then let me tackle him. He probably doesn’t realise that twisting words around a bit can alter the whole sense of the thing said.”

“Something in that,” agreed Young. “In any case, I don’t like the way gossip is being bandied around. Mud sticks, and there’s more than one character that’s being taken away in the locals round here of an evening.”

Again there was silence between the two men, and then Young said: “Look here, Barton. You knew Gerald Vanstead. You’d talked to him; you’d been in his car. Do you really believe he was incompetent enough to have left those brakes in the condition they were? We had the

chauffeur's evidence that deceased *did* inspect his brake drums. Are you willing to give your own opinion about it?"

"I can only say what I said before," replied Barton, "You use the word 'incompetent.' Competence is related to judgment. Gerald Vanstead's judgment was at fault in his driving in that he had no sense of responsibility. The way he drove was dangerous to other people as well as to himself. If his judgment was unreliable there, it may well have been unreliable when he was doing mechanical work on his car. And he drank too much. That's the crux of the whole thing to my mind."

"Added to which, everybody seems to have known that he drank too much," added Young.

3

"You're being more than generous to us, Miss Vanstead. It will make an incredible difference to have electricity and a main water supply," said Elizabeth Coombe.

Gilbert Barton's fiancée was standing in the big kitchen of the Home Farmhouse, talking to Judith Vanstead. Elizabeth was a redheaded girl; her short curly hair was frankly "marmalade," glowing and ardent. She had the creamy skin which so often goes with red hair, now liberally bespeckled with rather endearing golden freckles, and deep grey blue eyes with curling corn-coloured lashes. Judith smiled back at her.

"Shall we sit down a minute, Miss Coombe? Thanks. Oh dear. You look so well and young and happy, you make me feel a hundred. Don't think I'm grumbling—I love to see healthy happy people around, and I'm so glad you're coming here. As for the house, do believe that my father is the most considerate of landlords. The only reason this house hasn't been modernised is that old Gray said he *liked* it as it was. He wasn't going to be disturbed by having water pipes and electric wires mucking up the floors and walls. Then, when Mr. Barton came, my father was ill and I'm afraid I just neglected my responsibilities. But we'll get it put right now, so that it's all ready for you to come home to. You can go and see Swaine, and tell them about wallpapers and paint; and wouldn't you like a plastic floor over these awful stone flags? We've got green floors in our kitchens, rather gay and pretty."

"I don't really mind the flagstones," replied Elizabeth. "They're quite sensible in a farmhouse, where you're bound to get mud and dung brought in on people's boots. I hope you will tell your father how grateful I am, Miss Vanstead. I'm so very, very sorry he is so frail and ill."

Judith smiled again, and Elizabeth was reminded of the intensity of December sunshine, so vividly did Judith's smile light up her pale face and brooding dark eyes as she replied: "He is very frail, and I know he can't live for more than a year or two, but he has got over the operation shock, and he's not in any pain now. He is just very still and quiet and peaceful, but I think he's happy. Will you come in and see him sometime? He'd enjoy seeing you, even though he may not talk. I believe the sight of you would do anybody good, you're so alive. It must be lovely for your patients; so many trained nurses look tired and fractious."

"I think it annoys some of them that I look so well, and some people are allergic to red hair, you know. I wish I could put you to bed and look after you, Miss Vanstead. You look worn out."

"I'm all right, really. I'm very strong, only life has been rather overwhelming lately, and I've been worrying a lot. Do tell me, are you fond of children, or do you hate them?"

“Hate them? Goodness no, I love them! I hope to have at least six of my own. This is a lovely house for children to play in.”

Judith laughed. “My dear! how refreshing to hear of any modern girl wanting to have six children! I hope you’ll have them all here—it’ll be lovely to see nice babies about. But when I asked if you liked children I was thinking about my poor little nephew, Alan. Sometime I hope he’ll get to love Templedean—it’ll be his when he’s twenty-one. Of course now he hates the place, and he’s terrified of all of us and of everything. You can’t wonder—that’s why I sent him away. But when he comes back, if you would make friends with him, it might help a lot. He’s such a forlorn, frightened, ugly little boy. . . .”

“Of course I’ll make friends with him,” said Elizabeth. “I’m good with little boys. Don’t worry too much about him, Miss Vanstead. Children have the most miraculous powers of recuperation from shock. It’s as though they outgrow it, while older people suffer so much more.”

“I do try to remember that, but I can’t get over the awful guilty feeling. If only I hadn’t been so immersed in my own affairs, and thinking about Father, that awful tragedy might never have happened. I ought to have realised that my brother was a dangerous driver, but I didn’t.”

Elizabeth put out her hand impulsively, and laid it on Judith’s, finding that the latter’s hand was dead cold under her own. “You mustn’t let yourself dwell on thoughts like that, Miss Vanstead. It’s bad for you and it doesn’t help anyone else. There’s nothing dreadful about death—I do believe that—and your nephew will get over it. Children do get over things; they’re quite different from us, and it’s a mistake to think they have adult emotions and adult nerves. They haven’t. They’re growing, and growing things have a lot of resilience.”

“What a nice sensible person you are,” said Judith. “I’ll remember what you say; and now I’ll leave you to argue with Mr. Barton as to whether the bathroom is to be peach coloured or jade green, and whether you’d like the panelling stripped away in the dining room. I’m afraid it’s riddled with worms. Good-bye now, and I’m so glad you’re coming to live here.”

4

“She was marvellous, Gilbert, terribly kind and generous beyond words. You’re simply going to have this house gutted over your head; two bathrooms and a shower, electric points everywhere, immersion heater and hot rails, a big fridge and new fireplaces. She thought of everything, but, Gilbert, she’s ill. She’s just on the verge of a breakdown.”

“You can’t wonder, Liza. She was utterly wrapped up in her father, and then this ghastly accident knocked her endways. It was enough to make any woman crack up, but she carried on, just as serene and competent to all appearances as she’s always been.”

“Competent certainly, but serene, no. She controls her own nerves by sheer will power, but she’s very near a crack-up. What a mercy she was sensible enough to send the small boy away. She’d have submerged him with passionate devotion.”

“They sent him away almost at once. He couldn’t sleep and shrieked the place down till they doped him. Dash it all, Liza, I don’t wonder Miss Vanstead looks worn out. She’s had enough to make her.”

“Yes—but——

“But what?”

“It’s all over, a *fait accompli*. The brother and sister-in-law are dead, the father has survived his operation, and the boy’s being taken care of. She ought to be getting over it by now, but she’s all strung up, as though she’s waiting for something else. I put my hand over hers, and it was stone cold and rigid, all the muscles tensed, as though she were afraid.”

Gilbert Barton looked distressed. “My God! I hope the police haven’t been pestering her by asking more questions. They haven’t any right to, and she’s had enough to put up with.”

“The police? but why on earth should they?” demanded Elizabeth. “It was brought in as accidental death, wasn’t it?”

“Of course it was, but Inspector Young’s got a bee in his bonnet about that case. Can’t leave it alone, damn him.”

Elizabeth leaned forward with her elbows on the scrubbed kitchen table. “Tell me about it, Gilbert. Do you know you’re beginning to look worried too? I can’t have that. Much better tell me the whole thing and get it off your chest.”

Chapter 6

1

“The main facts were never in dispute,” reiterated Barton. “Vanstead’s brakes failed on the hill and the car, going about fifty miles an hour, crashed into the steam roller, somersaulted and went over the hedge in full view of the road men. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the police would have been perfectly satisfied with the evidence. In this case it seems they weren’t satisfied, though they had to accept the verdict. Young argued that quite a number of people profited by Vanstead’s death, and that it would have been quite possible to have interfered with the brake drums, but he couldn’t find any evidence that they were interfered with. In spite of the fact that Young was suspicious, he wasn’t likely to have got any fresh evidence and he’d have had to leave it alone if it hadn’t been for the fact that this telegraph linesman repeated what he’d heard Standish and me saying. When Young heard about this, he started out on the *qui vive* again—and when I remember all that Standish and I did say, it brings me out in a fair cold sweat.”

“Well, then, isn’t it much better to look things straight in the face and make up your mind what you’re worrying about?” asked Elizabeth, her calm voice quite unperturbed. “Your Inspector Young evidently suspects murder. Although it seems a callous thing to say, the wish may be father to the thought. An ambitious policeman might hope for promotion following astute work in a murder case. But, anyhow, whom does he suspect? The chauffeur?”

“Oh, Beach is the star turn suspect all right, but there are plenty of others. There’s Standish. Now Standish is a very able, interesting fellow, but I suspect he enjoys the fleshpots, and he was utterly fed up with Gerald Vanstead.”

“Standish—he’s the man I saw in the car with Miss Vanstead this morning,” said Elizabeth. “He’s—very devoted, isn’t he? I saw him watching her.”

Gilbert Barton fidgeted rather unhappily. “I don’t know, Liza. I feel a bit cheap discussing him, because we’re by way of being matey, and he’s been very decent to me.”

“I expect you’ve been very decent to him, too, you old ass,” replied Elizabeth placidly. “You’re a good-natured creature, Gilbert, and you like being helpful and pleasant, but if you’re really going to discuss this business thoroughly, it’s no use being too high-minded, nor yet too amiable. I asked you right out—does the Inspector think it was murder—and you haven’t negatived the suggestion. Murder is neither high-minded nor amiable, and it’s about as much use being squeamish when you discuss it as it is to be squeamish in the operating theatre.”

“Of course you’re right. You’re a sensible female, my lass,” said Barton. “Perhaps I shall feel better about discussing Standish if I remind you that he has quite as much reason to suspect me as I have to suspect him; and Young, for all that he’s very pleasant, is quite aware of the fact.”

“That gambit doesn’t really interest me, but let’s examine it *en passant*,” said Elizabeth. “Why should you have wanted Gerald Vanstead out of the way?”

“Because I like my job here, and he would have booted me if he inherited.”

“Who says so?”

“Standish.”

“Hm . . . well, I wonder. In any case, it’s not a very impressive motive. You’re quite capable of making a living elsewhere.”

“Maybe—but I should have hated to go, and I want to get married, and to have a home and settled prospects to offer my bride.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “Well, well . . . If Mr. Standish puts all that forward as a motive, I shall examine his own potential motives with great particularity. Was he to be booted too?”

“Of course. Gerald Vanstead loathed him. In any case, there would have been no job here for Standish after Sir Charles’s death.”

“Doesn’t that still hold? Standish won’t stay on after Sir Charles dies, I take it?”

“I rather think he will. There’s a lot of estate business, and there will be all sorts of fussifications during young Alan’s minority. Then Standish spoke of lending a hand with the milking herd here—recording and all the paper work connected with pedigree stock. He’s keen on genetics and wants to do some direct observations on milking strains.”

“Very interesting,” said Elizabeth dryly. “Tell me, do you think he’s fallen for Judith Vanstead, or is his aspect of devotion just part of the ‘digging himself in’ policy?”

“I don’t know, Liza. He’s a difficult chap to get to know. I should have put him down as a cold fish. All his interests are intellectual, although he likes his comforts. He also enjoys the leisure time he gets at Templedean. It occurred to me that he spread himself a bit in the direction of being useful to Miss Vanstead, because she’s the real power behind the throne. He’s a calculating sort of chap: he doesn’t do anything without a purpose—nothing impulsive about him. He came and helped at hay time, but I did notice that the times he came along were those when Judith Vanstead saw him doing it.”

“She doesn’t look like anybody’s sweetie,” said Elizabeth, “but women of forty do tend to have emotional crises, particularly those who’ve been ‘chaste as the icicle. . . .’ I wonder _____”

“Wonder what, angel?”

“She looks to me like a woman who’s living under an intolerable strain. If she’s fallen for Standish, and at the same time believes he engineered that car crash, it’d account for the state her nerves are in.”

Barton rubbed his head in perplexity. “I don’t think it’s that, Liza. Judith—well, damn all, I hardly think of her as a woman, in the sense that you’re one. There isn’t an atom of real humanity about her, not as a man means humanity. Intellect, purpose, conscious rectitude, a sense of duty—all that, plus devotion to her father, but nothing so lacking in reason and control as a desire to mate. No. I can’t swallow that one.”

“Why has she been so good to us, you and me, Gilbert? She’s been generous beyond reason over this house.”

“Isn’t that covered by what I said about duty and conscious rectitude? She does like being a good landowner and a good employer, and I think she was horrified at the state of this house. When she saw the sort of wench you are, and realised what this house must have looked like to you, she determined to be lavish. That’s typical, you know. Doing the large thing largely.”

“I don’t think you’ve got her quite right. She isn’t an easy person to assess. But let’s leave Judith for the moment. Any other suspects?”

“Oh lord, what a hell of a game. I wish to God that Young hadn’t started in on being suspicious; it’s demoralising. There’s old Walter Vanstead. He hated Gerald like stink.”

“Is he a permanent inmate at Templedean?”

“Very much so. He came here in 1940, during the blitz, and he’s dug himself in very comfortably. Got his own suite of rooms, his own manservant, his own library. It’d have been infuriating to him to have to clear out and see his nephew inherit.”

“Can he drive a car?”

“Lord, yes. He used to race at Brooklands; he was a top-notch driver and mechanic and he designed his own cars. He’s never seen driving himself here—I believe his eyesight’s pretty poor, and Beach always takes him out. They’re very thick. He goes up to town in the Daimler once a month, and Beach sees to it there’s always plenty of petrol.”

“Tell me some more about Walter. Is he married?”

“Widower. Got a son in the RAF. A very good pilot, I believe. Never comes down here. I believe he doesn’t like Aunt Judith and she doesn’t like him.”

Elizabeth sat with knitted brows, and at length said: “Gilbert, does anybody know what all these people were doing on the morning before Gerald Vanstead crashed his car?”

“I don’t know, angel, but you can’t get anything that way. Gerald’s car hadn’t been out since the previous morning, and he had been mucking about with it the previous afternoon. There was twenty-four hours, including the whole night, for any funny business to have been worked on those brake drums. When Gerald took the car out, he’d have driven along the drive, which is on the level, turned out of the main gates and declutched as he turned downhill. He wouldn’t have put his foot on the brake until he was approaching the curve—I know, I’ve seen him do it. Then he’d have found his brakes didn’t function, and it was all U.P. If it was murder, it was a very simple murder.”

“Yes, I see that,” replied Elizabeth, “but it seems pretty plain to me that if the police didn’t get any evidence of foul play during their original enquiry, it’s very unlikely they’ll get any now; every day that passes makes it more improbable. To point out that Gerald Vanstead’s death was a matter for satisfaction to quite a number of people doesn’t get the police anywhere, does it?”

“No, I suppose it doesn’t,” replied Gilbert, but he spoke without conviction.

“Of course it doesn’t, you old idiot!” said Elizabeth, “the only thing that could empower them to open the case again now is positive evidence that somebody did meddle with the Stanhall. If a witness came forward and gave sworn testimony that they saw somebody actually working on those brake drums, the police would make a move, but even then they have got to have corroboration, haven’t they? Also, the question would be asked: ‘If you saw somebody other than Mr. Vanstead touching the car, why didn’t you give evidence at the Inquest?’ and it’d take a bit of explaining.”

“Unless the witness happened to be like the telegraph linesman who overheard me and Standish talking, a chap who’s here today and gone tomorrow. It was the most improbable thing in the world that anybody should have been in a position to overhear us; we could see on to the road, we could see across the park, and yet this chap was up a tree, to all intents and purposes, and he can *prove* he was working on that telegraph post, and the very minute he was there, because he tested the line he was mending.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Yes. I know it was queer, but I still maintain it’s not the sort of evidence the police can reopen the case with. It underlined that you knew how dangerously Mr. Vanstead drove, and that Standish knew it, and it opens up the possibility, from the police point of view, that you and Standish may have passed on the information about Mr. Vanstead’s driving habits to other people—say to Beach and Mr. Walter Vanstead. But that still doesn’t make a case.”

“You’re very precise, darling. How do you know all this about police work?”

“By using my common sense, and reading detective stories. I’m interested in what constitutes evidence and what doesn’t, from the police point of view. They have very exact rules, fortunately for all of us. Gilbert, let’s leave the actual facts and do a bit of reconstruction. Just imagine for a moment that you, or I, had wanted to meddle with those brake drums. When would have been the safest time to do it?”

Gilbert looked rather horrified, but he considered the question seriously. “Why, at night, surely, when nobody was around.”

“Yes. I agree with you. Now whoever did it would have needed the key of the lock-up, wouldn’t they? Or is there a window?”

“There is a window, but it hasn’t been opened for years. I thought of that and went to have a look. It was all cobwebbed over. You can’t fake cobwebs.”

“Then the key was necessary. Or could you have put the lock wrong beforehand?”

“I don’t see how that could have been done. It’s a good lock, and Vanstead never left the door open. If the garage had been left open when he took his car out, anybody could have loosed the screws of the hasp, so that it would have given way to a good shove, but as he always shut the door, it’s no good postulating anything like that.”

“Very well. Key necessary. Anybody in the house could have found the key if they’d really wanted to. Now if they went to the garage at night, they’d have had to use a torch; they wouldn’t have risked putting the light on. What’s the chances of the interloper being seen or heard?”

“Very little chance, I should say. Neither the door nor the window of the lock-up is overlooked from the bedroom windows of the cottages. If anybody noticed anything, it would have been Beach, and he has already sworn that he saw no unauthorised person approach the garage at any time.”

“Do you believe him, Gilbert?”

Barton shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know, angel. I don’t like him, and I tend to distrust him on that account. He’s the sort of chap who’s buttery and smarmy to his employers and as near rude as makes no difference to chaps like me. With Mr. Walter Vanstead, Beach is on the tip of his toes all the time, treats him like royalty, with the real old-fashioned subservience of the Edwardian manservant. But I once suggested to Beach that he could lend a hand on the farm in his spare time. That was last harvest, when we nearly killed ourselves carting during that fine spell, and Beach was doing next to nothing all day long. He told me he was employed as a chauffeur, not a farm labourer.” Barton paused a moment, and then added: “I’d go as far as this: If anybody can be certain of the real facts of the case, it’s Beach. If there was any dirty work I bet Beach knows who did it, but he’ll never tell. He’s always been known as a very close chap, never gossiped, never made friends outside. As things have fallen out, Beach is a very well satisfied man. He’s in clover, and he knows it. He’s safe in a soft job until he’s due for a pension, and he’ll get his pension and his cottage. Come to think of it, Beach and I have got just that one thing in common. Gerald Vanstead’s death has resulted in security and satisfaction for both of us. So I can’t afford to spread myself over the question of motive.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I see that, but you aren’t the only ones in the same boat.”

Gilbert laughed, not very happily. “True enough. Let sleeping dogs lie is the motto in this place nowadays.”

The following morning Elizabeth, who was staying at the village inn out of respect to country decorum, walked across the park at Templedean. Judith Vanstead had invited her “to make use of the garden” at any time she wished, and Elizabeth strolled over the lawns towards the rose garden, marvelling that any family should still be able to command the labour which kept lawns and hedges and paths and borders in a state of perfection seldom achieved today. It was a still, pearly morning, with dew lying on the grass and scarce a leaf stirring, giving promise of a glorious day. Looking across the rose beds, all ablaze in their midsummer glory of full-blown flowers, Elizabeth saw a figure whose garb was all too familiar, a uniformed nurse, whose crisp white veil and apron were as fresh as the morning. Her first sense of surprise and slight irritation, for no trained nurse really welcomes the sight of a uniformed colleague when she is on holiday, gave way to a resigned “Of course, Sir Charles still has two nurses. This must be the night nurse . . .” and then Elizabeth realised that the profile bent over the fragrant tea roses was a familiar profile. In another moment the two women were face to face, and Elizabeth said: “Sister Temple? I worked under you at St. Faith’s, when you were theatre Sister. My name’s Coombe.”

“Good gracious! Fancy seeing you here, Nurse. Of course I remember you. Are you working down here?”

“No. My fiancé lives here, and I have been looking over the farmhouse. Miss Vanstead invited me to come and see the gardens.”

“Oh, so you’re the girl who’s going to marry that nice-looking farmer. Congratulations, my dear. You’ve got some courage to face being a farmer’s wife.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I come of farming stock, so the prospect doesn’t daunt me. I expect you are nursing Sir Charles Vanstead?”

“Yes. I’ve been here three weeks and I’m leaving on Saturday. Miss Vanstead wants me to stay on, but I haven’t the conscience, although it’s so lovely here; but my work’s surgical and there’s nothing for me to do here now. I took it on because Dr. Waterson asked me to, but I must get back and take another case.”

“I hear that your patient has done very well.”

“He certainly has—of course Waterson’s a brilliant surgeon—but now it’s only a case of marking time. One can’t *do* anything. But, nursing apart, I shall always be glad I came here—quite an experience. A maid to put out one’s clothes, run one’s bath, brush one’s hair—I’d no idea such conditions existed.”

“Neither had I.” Elizabeth laughed. “A nice change from hospital life, Sister.”

“It is indeed,” responded the older woman, “but as I said, I just haven’t the conscience to stay on here when I’m not really needed. When are you getting married?”

“Around Michaelmas—after harvest, that is.”

“You may be very useful here, if you’re still wanting to do some professional work. Nurse Dormer is staying on, and Miss Vanstead is a very sensible woman, though she’s had no training. There’s no need at all for two nurses at the moment, but there may be later on. Well, I had better get to my bed. I’ve been doing the night work, if you can call it work. It doesn’t feel natural to me to spend the night knitting and reading, with superb meals at suitable intervals.”

“It doesn’t sound as though your patient’s very exacting.”

“He’s not exacting enough. He’d rather die than give any trouble, dear old man. Why, there’s Miss Vanstead.”

Judith came over the grass towards them, a basket and scissors in her hand. “Good morning, Miss Coombe. I’m so glad to see you’ve come, when everything is looking so

beautiful. I wonder if you would come up and see my father? I told him you were staying in the village and he would like to see you. The morning's his best time."

"Yes, of course I will," replied Elizabeth. "Sister Temple complains that her patient doesn't give her enough trouble, a very unusual complaint."

"Sister Temple has been wonderful; we're so sorry she's leaving us," responded Judith. "Did you two know one another?"

"I used to bully Nurse Coombe when I was theatre sister at St. Faith's," replied Sister Temple. "She's a very good nurse, Miss Vanstead, and when I say good I mean good. Deary me, it seems a pity to go indoors on a day like this, and those roses are so heavenly."

Elizabeth followed Judith Vanstead across the lawns to the terrace, and before she left them Sister Temple said: "Come and see my room before you go, Miss Coombe. It's the most lovely room and I haven't had a chance to show it off, so don't forget!"

She ran on ahead, and Judith said: "We shall miss her so much. She has been so kind, in addition to being a wonderful nurse."

She led the way up the wide staircase, and Elizabeth realised the peacefulness, as well as the beauty, of the great house. It was utterly quiet, and it had a fragrance all its own, mingled of flowers and potpourri and old wood and stone, with a faint pleasant tang of the polish used on the shining woodwork. Bird song floated in faintly at wide-open doors and windows, and sunlight gilded ancient floor boards and panelling.

"You must love this house, Miss Vanstead," said Elizabeth. "I haven't been in many houses like this one, but some of those I *have* seen seem more like museums than real homes. This house has a feeling of being the home of people who love it."

"That's very nicely said, and it shows you're a sensitive person," said Judith. "I do love Templedean, and I think the time I spend on it is well spent; houses do take time, you know, just as gardens do. Of course, we're lucky in having good servants who are like old friends—most of them have been with us for years, and this house is their house, too, as well as mine. My father's room is in the south wing, along here."

3

"This is Miss Coombe, Father—Gilbert Barton's fiancée. She says she likes the Old Farm House."

One glance at Sir Charles Vanstead's face was enough to tell Elizabeth that he was a dying man. Bleached, emaciated, yet still possessing a dignity akin to nobility, the head rested against snowy pillows, only the cavernous eyes alight with life. His eyes smiled as he moved his thin hand towards hers, and Elizabeth said: "Indeed I love the farmhouse. My father was a farmer in Oxfordshire, and it feels like home to be amongst the smell of hay and cows again."

"Then Barton is a fortunate man, my dear. I hope you will be very happy and make Templedean your home for many years."

"I hope so too. Miss Vanstead has been more kind than I can say in arranging for the house to be made easy to work and charming to live in. I am very grateful, Sir Charles."

"Judith's a good girl. She does all the work now. As for gratitude, I think we have reason to be grateful to your young man, both for his good care of the land and in bringing you here." The slight pressure of his cold thin fingers relaxed, and Elizabeth turned towards the window.

"How lovely it is!" she said softly. "You can still see all the world from that window."

“All I want to see, sky and hilltop and trees. Thank you for coming to see me, my dear. I shall hope to hear your wedding bells after harvest, and, who knows, to claim the privilege of kissing the bride.” Following her own impulse before she had time to think of her own temerity, Elizabeth bent and kissed the old man’s forehead. “Thank you very much,” she said gently, and knew from his eyes that her impulsive action had not been taken amiss.

Judith followed her from the room. “He’s so frail,” she whispered, “and yet so much alive. I hope he will see the spring again. Now if you’d like to call on Sister Temple, Ellen here will take you to her room. Good-bye for now.”

Ellen, a middle-aged woman in a cherry-coloured print frock and voluminous apron, rose from her task of polishing the skirting boards, saying, “This way, miss. It’s an easy house to get lost in when you don’t know it.”

4

Sister Temple’s room was white-panelled, gay with fresh glazed chintz and fragrant with flowers. Elizabeth admired it wholeheartedly, adding: “It wouldn’t be human nature not to miss all this when you leave.”

“Of course I shall miss it, but I’m one of those tiresome women who likes her own work. I haven’t been doing any real nursing here this past ten days, but I do think I’ve helped Miss Vanstead over a bad patch. Under all that calm manner, she’s an emotional creature really, and her brother’s death nearly bowled her over, coming on top of everything else.”

“It was an appalling thing to happen,” said Elizabeth, but the other shrugged her shoulders rather impatiently.

“Of course one says that, but in point of fact it was a blessing in disguise. The brother must have been a thoroughly tiresome creature. Of course, I only just saw him, but one glance was enough. Unstable. A real neuropath. I’ve told Miss Vanstead quite frankly that his sudden death was a merciful thing really.”

Elizabeth looked at her in surprise, and after a moment’s pause said: “I’m very much interested in what you say, Sister. Of course everybody here gives their own version of the story, and I should be very glad if you’d tell me, in confidence, your own opinion. When you say ‘unstable,’ what do you really mean?”

“Uncontrolled, capable of anything if he got irritated. I’ll tell you my own opinion frankly, because I have got fond of Miss Vanstead. She evidently likes you, and you may be able to help her when I’ve left. Although she seems so sure of herself, she’s a lonely creature in many ways, and nerves run in this family. I don’t believe that car crash was an accident at all, and Miss Vanstead is quite sure it wasn’t.”

Elizabeth replied with suitable incredulity: “Whatever do you mean, Sister?”

“Don’t look so horrified, my dear. I mean that it was deliberate. Gerald Vanstead had got up against everybody. His wife gave him no peace, and even his sister was getting to loathe him. He just chose to end it.”

“But isn’t that rather a terrible assumption to make, unless you have pretty clear evidence?”

“What evidence *can* you have, beyond observation of the individual concerned? I have talked to Mr. Standish about it—he’s Sir Charles’s secretary, a rather cold-blooded intellectual with a scientific mind. Mr. Standish is convinced that it was suicide.”

Sister Temple produced a box of cigarettes and held it out invitingly. The cigarettes were handmade Virginians and to Elizabeth, who battled daily for her ten Woodbines, there seemed to be hundreds of them. As she lighted the de-luxe product, Elizabeth suddenly felt as though she were back in the hospital again, listening to the Sister's gossip. All nurses gossiped, strictly among themselves.

"Thank you, Sister," she said sedately, and then added: "In your judgment, Mr. Standish is a reliable observer?"

"Oh, quite—he has a very able mind. Then he had opportunities . . ." Sister Temple looked slightly mysterious, and glanced round the room before she lowered her voice: "You see, his bedroom is next to the one the Gerald Vansteads' had, and in the hot weather, when all the windows were open, it was impossible not to hear voices, and Mrs. Gerald had an appalling voice, shrill and nasal—it simply cut. She nagged her husband without end. Mr. Standish told me in confidence he wouldn't have been surprised if the husband had strangled her. . . . And now the really pathetic thing is that Miss Vanstead not only believes her brother crashed that car deliberately, she is *blaming* herself for it, because she didn't realise what a state his nerves were in. I was thankful she talked frankly to me at last. If she hadn't managed to confide in somebody, it might have caused devastating results, a guilt fixation, you know."

"But she seems such a self-controlled creature," murmured Elizabeth.

"I know. It's always that type which the psychiatrists find so difficult—*obstinate*, you know; convinced they know best."

She rose to her feet and added: "While you are here you *must* see my bathroom. It's just too utterly lovely. . . ."

Elizabeth followed her to the bathroom, thinking to herself, "I wonder if I'm growing like that. *What* a female!"

Chapter 7

1

“My dear Judith, I’m delighted to see you!” exclaimed Miss Hobart, “I haven’t liked to come over to Templedean, because I know that visitors are nothing but a nuisance when you have serious illness in the house, but I think of you so often, and wish I could do something to help you.”

“That’s just like you, Miss Hobart. You’re the kindest soul I know, and I feel that I have neglected you shockingly,” replied Judith. “I have missed you very much, and missed our work at the hospital. And now that I have come over to see you, it’s just to ask you to help me with something.”

“Delighted!” Miss Hobart beamed. “Anything I can do, my dear, will give me great pleasure.”

“Oh dear, I’m afraid it won’t,” said Judith ruefully. “You know I have had Alan at home for this last fortnight of the summer holiday?”

“Yes. I heard he was with you. How is he, poor little lad?”

Judith sighed. “I can at least have the pleasure of being honest with you, Miss Hobart. You never take me amiss. He is a poor little lad, but he’s also a very nasty little boy. These psychologists may be good at dealing with nervy maladjusted children, but it seems to me they encourage them to be selfish and mannerless and greedy and concentrate on themselves. I can’t pretend this last fortnight has been a success. I know Alan hates me and hates Templedean, but I think it’s right to have him at home for part of the holidays. He’s got to get over his fear of the place and to realise we’re his friends and that we want to make him happy.”

“And you’re quite right!” exclaimed Miss Hobart with vigour. “Psychologists—well, I mustn’t be old-fashioned and narrow-minded, but I think they encourage all the nastiness which children can be capable of. I don’t mind naughty children, or greedy children, or even children who lie and steal. I often told lies when I was a child, and I also stole the fruit and sweets. What horrifies me these days is the child who has been brought up on ‘self-expression’ lines and always tells the truth at awkward moments, generally *most* unpleasant truths!”

Judith laughed. “I know. I know only too well! Now listen, my dear. Alan goes back to school on Thursday next week, September 20. I want to give him one nice outing before he goes back, a picnic with a proper blowout of éclairs and meringues and fizzy lemonade. Alan likes being out of doors, thank goodness, but he’s a nightmare in the gardens, an imp of wickedness on the farm, and ever since the accident the mere sight of a car makes him sick. Now have you still got your nice old governess cart?”

“Indeed I have! and old fat Bobbin to draw it!” said Miss Hobart, “such a reliable old pony—nothing upsets her.”

“Splendid!” exclaimed Judith. “And is your lovely tomboy of a great-niece still with you?”

“Bless you, yes. My Caroline’s a great joy to me. She does all the old-fashioned naughty things and she’s as wholesome as a Cox’s Orange Pippin. She’d be *very* good for Alan!”

"I'm sure she would! If she's anything like her great-aunt she'd punch Alan until he'd got something to howl for—I should love to do it myself. Now Miss Hobart dear, will you be an angel and drive the trap over with Caroline and take Alan out to Bury Hill? I'll go on in the car and take the food, then when we've picnicked the two children can go blackberrying, and you and I can sit and laze in the sunshine. I know it won't be much fun for Caroline, but tell her that I *promise* the meringues and Eccles cakes and ice cream shall be worth while."

"My dear, she'll jump at it! Caroline *loves* her food, and they can unharness Bobbin and ride bareback. May I tell Caroline a little about Alan? She's a very understanding child."

"Please do. Tell her all about him, so that she can make allowances. I *know* he's a dreadful child at present, but he's never had a chance, has he? His life has been one series of horrors."

"I know, my dear, I know." Miss Hobart patted Judith's shoulder understandingly. "Don't you fret about things. I'm sure Caroline will be helpful. Now shall we say Tuesday next week, calling for Alan between half-past eleven and twelve? That will be very nice."

"Thank you so much, Miss Alicia. You are a dear. I thought of asking young Mrs. Barton; they're just back from a very short honeymoon, and I like her so much."

"Do; I want to meet her—I'm told she's charming. Was it your pretty idea to have a peal rung for them to welcome them home? I heard it here quite clearly."

"No, it was Father's idea. He was very taken with her, and would have liked her to be married from Templedean, but that wouldn't have been fair to her people. Father said he wanted to hear a wedding peal again, so the ringers did the thing properly and had their cakes and ale in the old-fashioned way."

"What a lovely idea! I'm so glad Sir Charles was well enough to think of a thing like that. It's rather wonderful of him."

Judith moved over to the window and stood with half-averted head as she replied: "The incredible thing about him is that his mind retains its freshness. Although he says very little, because talking exhausts him, I realise again and again that his mind is quite unaltered; he's just as kind and thoughtful, and remembers about everything. He wants things to go on unchanged, and that was partly why he was so pleased about Gilbert Barton settling at the Old Farm. Father said it gave him a sense of continuity, something wholesome which would endure into future years."

Miss Hobart nodded her grey head. "I understand that so well, my dear. When I wake up and look at the beech trees, I like to think they'll be there, long after I've been forgotten. . . . Well, now, we've got all that settled for next Tuesday. There will be Alan and Caroline, you and me, and Mrs. Barton——"

"Yes, and perhaps Herbert Standish."

"Good. I'm old-fashioned; I like to have a man at a picnic, just in case of emergencies."

Judith laughed. "I think the only emergency likely to arise is that Alan may need a spanking. If so, Standish can do it!"

"Exactly." Miss Hobart beamed.

Caroline Hobart was twelve years old, big and strong for her years, plain and fat and sensible. She listened patiently to her great-aunt's description of "poor little Alan."

"Yes, Auntie. He sounds pretty wet. I think I saw him throwing stones at Bailey's ducklings on the pond. I'd have punched him—but I think Bailey copped him. All right. I'll

play up. We've had some of these psycho brats at school. I could tell you quite a lot about them, but you wouldn't like it so I won't."

"Thank you, Caroline. What a sensible child you are," murmured Miss Hobart.

Tuesday morning dawned bright and clear. Caroline groomed Bobbin and harnessed her herself. She asked very politely if she might drive, and the placid pony ambled contentedly along the level, took the hill at her own pace, and appeared to enjoy the parkland.

Alan Vanstead was waiting for them at the front door. He was a thin, pallid, undersized little boy, with an expression of chronic discontent.

"Good morning, Alan. It's very kind of you to ask us to your picnic. I am Miss Hobart, and this is Caroline."

"Hullo, Alan. Can you drive?" asked Caroline cheerfully.

"No. And it isn't my picnic. I hate picnics. It's Aunt Judith's picnic."

"Well, you needn't come if you don't want to," replied Caroline. "If you don't come there'll be all the more meringues and ices for me, but if you're going to come, buck up, because Bobbin gets bored with standing."

Alan decided to come, and throughout the drive Miss Hobart had every reason to be grateful to Caroline. The latter, with imperturbable cheerfulness, behaved like a stone-walling batsman; she made no attempt to score herself, but she returned every one of Alan's complaints and sneers neatly, placing her balls, as it were, with considerable skill. By the time they arrived at the woodland clearing on Bury Hill they found that Judith Vanstead and Herbert Standish had already set out picnic things and deck chairs. Caroline, with a wink at her great-aunt, got busy with unharnessing Bobbin and tethering her in a grassy spot. Then Elizabeth Barton arrived, adding her own offering of homemade toffees and peppermint creams, and they all settled down to the real business of the day, which was eating.

Even over the distractions of chicken sandwiches and iced ginger pop, Caroline remembered to "play up." She plied Alan with questions about his school and supplied lively reminiscences of her own. Elizabeth proved to have some good school stories and vied with Caroline in "I bet you games" and mild dares, while Alan stuffed himself with cream cakes and trifle.

"Goodness, I haven't eaten so much for years!" said Elizabeth at last. "We'd better walk it off. Caroline, where do the best blackberries grow? I've brought two baskets and I want to make bramble jelly when I get home."

"Then you'd better go downhill to the hedge there," said Caroline. "I know the blackberries are super there. Alan says he likes nuts, so he and I are going nutting. Come on, Alan, it's not far. I bet I get twice as many as you do."

Alan followed Caroline, not very willingly, and Miss Hobart beamed at Judith.

"Excellent!" she said. "I think that's gone very well."

"Very well," said Standish dryly. "I give Alan half an hour before he's very sick indeed, Miss Vanstead, and you will have only yourself to blame. You simply encouraged him to gorge."

"I encouraged Caroline, too, didn't I?" said Judith indignantly. "Actually she ate more than Alan did, because I watched. But Caroline always says 'please' and doesn't snatch, so one doesn't think of her as greedy."

"I don't think it does children any harm to overeat once in a way," said Miss Hobart. "Syrup of figs always puts it right, though Caroline seldom needs it; I expect she's eating crab apples now; she *will* do it—nasty things."

“Oh! I do hope she doesn’t let Alan eat any, or there will be trouble. Ought I to go after them?” exclaimed Judith.

“Don’t be so silly!” Herbert Standish spoke quite sternly. “What that small boy needs is to behave like any other urchin and take the consequences. This is the very first time since he came to England that he’s gone off the leading strings with a wholesome young barbarian like Caroline. Leave them alone, do. Now I’m going to find that badger set, and mark a hide where I can watch them some fine night; and I hope you two will enjoy a real gossip in peace, and a nap to follow.”

“Thank you for everything, including the good advice,” said Judith. “I only beseech you not to collect ‘edible fungi.’ I know you’ll poison yourself sometime, and Cook doesn’t like dealing with them.”

Standish laughed. “The prejudices of the average English cook defeat me, but if I find anything really succulent I’ll cook it myself. If I’m not back by the time you’re ready to leave, don’t wait for me. I’ll walk home. But I’ll take the picnic baskets back to the car first, so here goes.”

“He’s really a much more sociable man than I had thought,” said Miss Hobart, as Standish walked off, laden with hampers. “His manner is discouraging at first, but he’s really very courteous and kind.”

“Standish is all right,” said Judith. “He’s prim and dry and takes a lot of getting to know, but he’s been invaluable since Father was ill. He’s very good to me in his own queer way, always willing to do anything to help, and fundamentally goodhearted. He’s also very sensible, and when I have been nearly frantic with distress, his cool common sense has a sort of tonic effect. He was more help to me than anybody else when Gerald was killed, simply through being realistic and unemotional. And he’s always there when I want him, and always clears out when I don’t.”

“What better testimonial could you offer to any man?” murmured Miss Hobart.

3

It was very pleasant in the sunny clearing on that golden September afternoon: the beech trees in the wood beyond were still untouched with gold, but bramble and wayfaring tree, spindle berry and dogwood were glowing with crimson and scarlet and pink and gold. Judith chattered on happily enough to her old friend for half an hour or more, and then Miss Hobart became aware that the younger woman glanced towards the woodland path with increasing frequency.

“Don’t worry about them, my dear. Caroline is a very sensible child; she will look after Alan for you,” said Miss Hobart, and Judith replied:

“I’m sure she will. I know it’s stupid to worry about him, but he’s such a miserable little duffer. He seems to have a genius for hurting himself, and though I admit he’s a little horror, I’m very fond of him. . . .”

It was just before two o’clock that they heard Caroline’s voice saying: “There they are, Alan. It wasn’t so very far really, was it?”

When the children appeared, Caroline was holding Alan by the hand, pulling him along. One glance at Alan’s face prepared Miss Hobart for Caroline’s apologetic statement. “I’m

afraid Alan's been sick." He certainly looked very sick indeed, his face greenish grey, his eyes black. Judith jumped up.

"Oh, poor Alan! That was bad luck. Come and sit down for a little while, and then we'll get on home."

The boy seemed to be almost staggering, and he tumbled down onto the grass and sat shivering, as though in a rigor. Judith put a coat round his shoulders, and asked him if he would like some water, but he didn't answer her. A moment later, Herbert Standish came striding across the clearing, and gave one sardonic look at the shivering small boy.

"Home's the best place, old chap," he said, kindly enough. "You'd better come in the car—not so shaky as the trap. Come along now."

Alan made no protest when the word "car" was spoken, but neither did he attempt to get up. "Oh well, I don't expect you're that heavy," said Standish cheerfully. "Here goes." He picked the boy up and carried him over the rough ground towards the lane where they had left the car. Judith turned to Miss Hobart.

"I'm so sorry, I'd better go with him. He does look ill. . . . Oh, here's Mrs. Barton." She turned to Elizabeth. "The worst has happened and Alan is *hors de combat*, just plain sick. Will you forgive me if I rush? Mr. Standish is driving us."

"Of course. Can I help? Let me come with you," said Elizabeth, but Judith said:

"No. I'll manage. *Do* forgive me, all of you," and she ran after Standish.

"How very unfortunate," said Miss Hobart. "I'm afraid it was those meringues. You didn't let him eat any crab apples, did you, Caroline?"

"There weren't any to eat. He may have eaten some blackberries, but I don't think he did. He kept on saying he felt sick, so I told him to sit down while I climbed a tree. Then he was. Very. So I brought him back, only he was very slow. He says he's always being sick."

"Well, it was very unfortunate. The only good thing about it is that he felt too sick to make a fuss about going in the car, so perhaps he'll get over that at the same time," said Miss Hobart optimistically. She turned to Elizabeth, saying, "Would you care to come back in the trap with us, Mrs. Barton? We should so much like to have you."

"Thank you very much. I should love to," replied Elizabeth. "Could we load the deck chairs in too? It'd save somebody a journey coming to fetch them."

"Of course. Caroline can harness Bobbin for us; she's very handy with ponies and horses," said Miss Hobart. Caroline ran off to get Bobbin and Miss Hobart went on:

"I'm so sorry about Alan; sorry for Miss Vanstead, that is. It seems such a shame after she took so much trouble, and though he did eat rather a lot, it was all very wholesome food; those homemade meringues and *éclairs* with fresh cream were delicious. They oughtn't to have made any little boy sick."

"Not any ordinary boy," agreed Elizabeth, "but Alan looks very sickly and nervy. They probably keep him on a strict diet at that queer school of his, and he can't digest the things which healthy children can. What a queer warped little mind! Of course it's quite possible that his sickness was a sort of exhibitionism: he couldn't compete with Caroline over anything else, so he made himself sick to attract attention."

"Dear me, what a very tiresome peculiarity!" said Miss Hobart, and Elizabeth laughed.

"Very tiresome, but not so uncommon as you might think," she replied.

Herbert Standish drove the car back to Templedean swiftly and skilfully. Alan, sitting in the back with Judith's arm supporting him, seemed to be asleep, and when they arrived home Standish said:

"If he's asleep, don't wake him up. I'll take him upstairs and put him on his bed." With a glance at Judith he added: "You'd better go and lie down yourself, or you'll be being sick too. You look fagged out."

"I don't call that very polite," protested Judith, as Standish lifted the boy out of the car, carefully and gently. "I'll come up and see him settled."

"If you were less anxious over the brat, it'd be better for both of you," he said. "For goodness' sake leave him to me, and try to forget he exists. He's bilious—let him sleep it off."

He went on into the house, carrying Alan, and Judith followed him upstairs. As they got to the top of the stairs, Judith suddenly tripped and came down heavily on her knees.

Standish stopped abruptly, exclaiming: "For heaven's sake—what's the matter now? Have you hurt yourself?"

"No. Of course not. I slipped on something. Something fell out of Alan's pocket, a squashy blackberry or currant or something."

"Then go along and lie down," urged Standish. "I'll see to the brat."

He went on ahead, and Judith sat on the stairs rubbing her knee, and picking a black fruit skin from her light tweed skirt. While she was still sitting there, Janet, her personal maid, came running up.

"Oh, madam, are you hurt? Can I do anything?"

"No. I'm not hurt, Janet. I just tripped over something Alan dropped on the stairs; you might wipe it off. I think it's a black currant. I think I'll go and rest. I'm tired, though I can't think why."

"You've got tired worrying about Master Alan, madam. We've all noticed it. Come along now and I'll draw your curtains. Why not take an aspirin and have a good sleep? You look worn out."

"I do feel as though I should like a sleep, Janet. It was all so disappointing. Alan got sick, and he looks so ill."

"Oh, don't fret yourself, madam. He's always being sick. Come along, do, and have your rest."

Judith followed the maid to her own peaceful beautiful room, and Janet said:

"Sit down, do, madam, and I'll take your shoes off—and this skirt must go to the cleaners."

"Have you seen Nurse Dormer, Janet?"

"Yes, madam. She has just gone off duty. Sir Charles is very comfortable, and Stubbs is with him. Stubbs says the master is nicely today, better than he has been for months."

"Oh, good! I *am* glad!"

"So you can have your sleep and nothing to fret you, madam. I'll go and see to the little boy myself."

"Thank you, Janet. I expect he'll soon be better. What a kind girl you are."

"And if you could just forget about everybody but yourself for a few hours, it'd do you a power of good, madam," said Janet firmly.

Janet was a lowland Scot, a practical, plain-spoken girl, capable of considerable devotion, but with no nonsense about her. She tucked her mistress up comfortably, gave her an aspirin

tablet, drew the curtains, and said, "I'll look in at tea time, madam, and I hope you'll have a nice sleep."

Closing the door, Janet then made her way to Alan's bedroom, and met Standish coming out.

"I've put him to bed—he's sleepy and heavy and didn't argue for once," he said.

Janet glanced in at the open door and saw, to her surprise, that Alan was in his pyjamas in bed, his clothes hung neatly over a chair. He was curled up in the manner of small boys, and Janet nodded.

"The best place for him; thank you, sir. I promised Miss Vanstead I'd come and have a look at him, but you've done all there is to do."

Standish paused after he had closed the bedroom door. "What do you make of the kid, Janet? Is he really so delicate?"

"Och!" she said scornfully. "He's a sickly wee thing, but he's never had a chance. His mother slaved for him in that prison camp, and when they got free she couldn't give over. She petted and fussed him every minute of the day and night, and turned his wee head altogether. And this school he's at, it'll never make anything of him. If he steals and lies, it's a symptom: if he's sick, it's a doctor's job. If I had my way with him, I'd make him work hard and live hard, but the mistress, she's soft over him."

"We seem to have the same opinions about him," said Standish. "All spoilt children are delicate. I've often noticed it."

"I've seen him put his fingers down his throat to make himself sick, just to get notice taken of him," said Janet disgustedly. "If he were mine, I'd have leathered him for it. They'll never make anything of him the way they're going, poor wee bit of misery that he is."

"Well, I should say the best thing to do was to leave him without any food tonight," said Standish.

"You're right, sir. And plain porridge for his breakfast the morn's morn; but we shall see."

Standish laughed. "I'm afraid so. It'll more likely be hothouse grapes when he wakes up, and a nice peach for a treat. He's a nasty little toad, Janet."

"He is that," she agreed.

Chapter 8

1

Walter Vanstead and Standish were the only members of the household who appeared at tea time, and Standish poured out tea with a prim precision which amused the older man.

"Thanks. You do it as to the manner born, Standish. Is my niece still out?"

"No, she came in some time ago, slightly the worse for wear. Young Alan overate, and was sick."

"Loathsome child! He's the dead spit of his father. Gerald was always being sick," said Walter Vanstead disgustedly. "I saw Alan in Abbot's Wood a few hours ago, and promptly retired in the other direction. That badger set you've been marking is deserted, Standish. The brutes have all moved over to the quarry end."

"Oh no, they haven't," replied Standish. "They're still there all right. I'm going out tonight, to get some photographs. I didn't know you'd been up there. Thinking about the shooting?"

"To some extent. The real reason I went was that I'd left a shooting stick up there. I got Beach to take me up to the main ride, and then he and I searched till we found the thing. If I'd realised that Judith was taking her party up there, I'd have given the wood a wide berth. I can't understand her over that kid. She's always been a levelheaded, sensible creature, and now she seems to have gone sentimental and unreasonable over that singularly objectionable boy. She's doing him no good, either. What he needs is discipline."

Standish walked up to the tea table and refilled his cup. "I suppose her attitude's natural enough," he said. "Her brother's death was a shock to her, and she blamed herself for not having studied him more. She's trying to compensate by excessive zeal for the child. . . . He's objectionable, I grant you, but common humanity impels one to admit that he's pitiable. I put him to bed just now, and I've never seen a more wretched little bag of bones."

"Put him to bed! Good God! Turned nursemaid, have you?" snorted Walter Vanstead.

"I've done a variety of things in my time, pleasant and unpleasant," replied Standish. "On this occasion I did what seemed most sensible. Miss Vanstead looked worn out, so at least it saved her an unsavoury job. She would certainly have done it if I hadn't. It doesn't take much acumen to realise that every one of the servants in this house is fed up with Alan, and I don't blame them."

"Quite, quite," murmured Walter. "It's history repeating itself. Frankly, I think it would have been much better if the boy had been knocked out with his parents. He looks an unhealthy, semi-diseased creature to me——"

"Better?" interpolated Standish sardonically. "Better for whom?"

"For everybody, including the child himself," said Vanstead impatiently. "He's next door to a moron so far as intelligence is concerned; he's chronically unhealthy, and he's a cruel, foul-minded little beast. What sort of future is there for a boy like that?"

"His future is no concern of mine, fortunately for me," retorted Standish. "In my own judgment, his future isn't likely to be very extensive. He'll probably go out like a snuffed candle the first infectious disease he picks up; but I hope it doesn't happen yet awhile."

Walter Vanstead lighted a cigarette. "I'm not a callous chap, Standish, not *au fond*. I admit there's something in what you say about the boy being pitiable. My point is that he'll continue to be pitiable—a puking, sickly, half-witted little misery. That's what I meant when I said it might have been better if he'd been . . . snuffed out . . . with his parents."

"As a reflection, it's not a very profitable one," rejoined Standish dryly. "And when I said I hoped that he doesn't snuff out yet awhile, I had two considerations in mind. His aunt is the first. She's got enough distress to deal with. The second is that it would be undesirable to focus attention afresh on this establishment. There's been gossip enough, and believe me, the last lot of gossip is by no means dead yet."

Walter Vanstead looked at the other man steadily. "Would you like to elucidate that point, Standish?"

"I should not. But if you wish for enlightenment, I think the Superintendent of Police might be ready to supply it. He is quite an intelligent man."

"You surprise me," said Vanstead dryly.

2

When her maid peeped into the bedroom at half-past six, Judith Vanstead was just stretching a hand out, sleepily, towards her bedside clock.

"Is that you, Janet? I've had such a heavenly rest—fast asleep ever since you left me. What time is it? Half-past six? Oh, how awful of me! You ought to have woken me; you know I always go and see my father at half-past five. . . ."

"Now don't fret, madam. I saw Sir Charles myself and told him you were resting, and he said he was delighted to hear it. He said that he hoped you would have your dinner in bed and not worry about anything—nothing would please him more than to know you were having a real rest, and he'd be very vexed if you got up before tomorrow morning."

Judith laughed. "How kind he is, always worrying about me getting tired, poor old darling! It *would* be nice to stay in bed for once. But how is Alan, Janet?"

"He's asleep, madam. He hasn't been sick again. I've peeped in several times, and he's as quiet as a lamb."

"Thank goodness! Then perhaps I can be lazy for once. You're sure Sir Charles was comfortable—not in pain, or distressed?"

"Quite sure, madam. Stubbs said the master seemed better today than he's been for a long while."

"Oh, I *am* glad. Well, Janet, I'm going to take your advice. Turn my bath on, please, and you can get me a glass of sherry. Tell Cook to send me up a tray; a boiled egg will do, and some fruit. And you'd better tell Mr. Walter that I'm being lazy. Don't let him think I'm ill, because I'm not. And I'd like my bedside phone put through to exchange, please."

"Very good, madam. I'll see to it all. I'll run your bath at once."

It was a long time since Judith had had a meal in bed. Walter Vanstead and Standish ate their dinner almost in silence, but both had good appetites and did full justice to soup and bird, sweet and savoury. When they were left alone with their port, the older man said:

"This departure from the normal has quite a lot to commend it. I always enjoy a good meal, but a good meal eaten in silence is especially enjoyable. Taciturnity is a virtue, Standish."

“Shared in common with the beasts of the field,” replied Standish. “Cattle out at pasture are admirably taciturn.”

Walter Vanstead laughed. “Admitted. Perhaps I should have said taciturnity in moderation and at the right times. My niece has great ability. She shows it not least in obtaining and retaining the services of a first-class cook. But how many good meals have I eaten here which have been spoilt by unnecessary nervous tension. Judith seems to be always worrying these days.”

“She has had plenty of occasion.”

Walter Vanstead refilled his glass, and remained silent for a few moments, studying his companion coolly. Standish seemed quite indifferent to this scrutiny; he sat very still, gazing straight in front of him.

“It has always seemed to me that to worry about things is a sign of a weak character,” went on Vanstead. “How much better to face a thing, make a decision, and thereafter leave it alone. Worrying helps nobody. I should hazard a guess, Standish, that you have never worried about anything in your life.”

Standish finished his port and pushed back his chair.

“If I may say so without offence, sir, to hazard guesses on subjects concerning which you have no data is hardly more profitable than worrying about them. If you will excuse me leaving you, I should like to get out to that badger set before dark. I hope to obtain some photographs which will convince you that the set is not deserted.”

“By all means,” replied Vanstead. “I am always open to conviction.”

3

It was about nine o’clock that evening that Judith rang for her maid and Janet hurried along to her mistress’s bedroom.

“Janet, will you ask Nurse Dormer to come, quickly. I think Alan is ill—very ill. I’ve just been to his room.”

“But, madam, Nurse Dormer is away. She is spending tonight with some friends in Oxford.”

“Oh dear, how maddening. Then I must get Dr. Rasen to come out.”

She caught up the telephone, and Janet expostulated:

“What makes you think he’s ill, madam? He has been sleeping quite peacefully.”

“It isn’t ordinary healthy sleep. It’s more like a coma. Oh, why did I stay in bed? If I’d gone to see him earlier as I ought to have done I should have realised at once . . . Hullo? I want Dr. Rasen, please. Miss Vanstead of Templedean Place . . . What? But can’t you get him? It’s urgent . . . Who? Dr. Last? Thank you . . . Yes. I’ll ring him.”

Judith slapped the receiver down in exasperation. “It’s always the same—when you want a doctor he’s sure to be out, and Dr. Last is hopeless. He’s too old and muddle-headed.”

She jumped up, flinging off her dressing gown. “Give me that long house frock, Janet, the blue one—quickly, and don’t argue. That child may be dying.”

Like a whirlwind, she snatched the long gown from Janet and put it on over her nightgown, fastening the long zip which went from neck to ankles, and was out of the room before the maid had time to expostulate. Janet followed her mistress, and saw Annie, one of the housemaids, standing open-mouthed on the landing.

“Whatever is it?” she gasped. “She looked—beside herself.”

“She’s beside herself all right. The poor soul’s ill. . . . I’ve seen this coming,” said Janet, as she hurried on.

Walter Vanstead was in the hall, and he turned in astonishment as he saw his niece rushing downstairs, white-faced.

“My dear Judith! What on earth is the matter?” he exclaimed.

“It’s Alan. He’s ill, desperately ill, and Dr. Rasen is away. Uncle, I want Herbert Standish. He must go and get a doctor, at once.”

“Standish is out, up in the woods somewhere. If you want a doctor, why not telephone? I’ll do it, my dear. You look ill. Janet, see that your mistress goes back to bed. . . .”

“I am *not* ill!” Judith nearly screamed the words out. “It’s Alan who is ill. I tell you he is dying, and it is all my fault. I ought to have realised. If Standish is out, Beach must go. Ring through for him at once, Uncle, and tell him he *must* get a doctor. Even Last is better than nobody. Beach must go and fetch him.”

“Very well, my dear. I’ll send Beach at once, but do go back to your room. You look——”

“It doesn’t matter how *I* look. I tell you the child’s dying while you stand and argue,” she cried. “I know you hate him, as you hated Gerald. You may *want* him to die, but I’m not going to let him——”

“My *dear* Judith, you don’t know what you’re saying. For goodness’ sake, control yourself,” said Walter Vanstead coldly. “I will send Beach immediately, but do try to realise that hysteria helps nobody.”

Judith turned round and began to go upstairs again, ignoring Janet as though she did not exist. The maid followed her mistress upstairs, and Judith paused at the top of the flight.

“Janet, do you remember I told you to wipe the stair where I slipped?”

“Yes, madam. I did it at once.”

“Do you remember what it was that I slipped on—a fruit skin, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, madam. Something like a black currant, as you said.”

“There aren’t any black currants in September,” said Judith stonily, as she hurried on along the passage towards Alan’s room.

“The poor soul’s out of her mind; she’s daft, doesn’t know what she’s saying,” thought Janet.

Once in Alan’s room, Judith put all the light switches down and went across to the bed, pulling the bedclothes down from the boy’s head and shoulders. He lay curled up, but there was nothing of the relaxed ease of a sleeping child in the angular little body, and his face was a greenish pallor against the white bed linen. Judith put her hand on his shoulder and shook him.

“Alan!” she cried. “Alan, wake up. Oh, if we could only wake him, Janet. I don’t know what to do. . . . Open that window and I’ll lift him up. . . .”

“Better let him be, madam,” urged Janet, “Foreby it’s a fit he’s had. Let him be till the doctor comes. You may do more harm than good. I’ll get some hot bottles to warm him. Children do have fits. I mind my wee brother once——”

“It isn’t a fit,” said Judith. “Can you hear his heart beating, Janet?”

As the maid bent over the bed, Walter Vanstead came into the room.

“Beach has gone for Dr. Last, Judith. I phoned through—they’ll be back in a few minutes. What’s the matter with the child?”

“He’s been poisoned,” said Judith. “He must have eaten something in the woods. Look at his fingernails, you can see the black stain the fruit made.”

“He was picking blackberries, Judith——”

“It’s not blackberries,” she retorted. “Where is his coat? He may have put some in his pockets.”

She picked up Alan’s blazer, which Standish had hung over a chair, and put her hand in the pockets. There were some hazelnuts there, some squashed chocolates, a few blackberries, and a few shiny little black fruits, resembling black currants at a casual glance, but more oval in shape.

“What did I tell you?” cried Judith. “He ate some of these and they’ve poisoned him.”

“But what are they?” demanded Vanstead.

“Deadly nightshade,” she replied, and sat down heavily on the bed. “If only I hadn’t gone to sleep,” she cried, “but I was so tired—so deadly tired.”

4

It was after midnight that Herbert Standish arrived back. He let himself in at a side door with his own latchkey and then went to the smoking room, where he knew that he would find a drink and some sandwiches. He was surprised to find Walter Vanstead there, sitting by a good log fire, a glass in his hand.

“That fire looks good,” said Standish. “Watching badgers is a chilly job, and I think there’s a frost tonight. Incidentally, I got my photographs.”

“Did you?” enquired Vanstead dryly, and something in his tone caused Standish to look round, just as he was lifting the decanter.

“We’ve had the hell of an evening here,” Vanstead went on. “That boy’s dead. Poisoned himself with some berries he must have found in the woods. Judith’s nearly out of her mind about it.”

Standish stood stock-still, the decanter in his hand. “You mean Alan . . . is dead?”

“I do. We had Dr. Last up, and a couple of doctors from Inchcombe, but they couldn’t do anything about it—too late. Do you know the stuff? They found these in his pockets, mixed up with blackberries.”

He pointed to two berries lying on the table, still shining black, within their pointed green calyx. Standish put the decanter down, and stared at the small fruit.

“Good God! *Atropa belladonna*—nightshade. Where the hell did he find them?”

“In the woods, I take it. Apparently the thing’s not uncommon on chalk or limestone. Ever find it yourself? You’re pretty good on field botany, I believe.”

“I’ve seen it, but not around here. Poor little devil . . . I never thought of that. . . . But didn’t anybody keep an eye on him?”

“Judith was tired out. She went to lie down and her maid persuaded her to take an aspirin and get a decent sleep. Janet went in and looked at the boy several times. She said he was fast asleep, and she thought it better to leave him—perfectly sensible, I’d have done the same myself. Judith went in at nine o’clock, turned the light on and realised the kid was in a bad way. As it happened, Nurse Dormer was out, and Dr. Rasen away, although I don’t think it would have made any difference. I gather that stuff has a paralytic action on the throat muscles, like atropine. He’d have died in his sleep.”

Standish poured himself out a stiff whisky and brought it across to the fireplace. “It’s like a nightmare,” he said slowly. “One damn thing after another. That’ll mean another Inquest.”

“Not necessarily. The cause of death isn’t in dispute—atropine poisoning’s always obvious, owing to the dilation of the pupils. They even found some of the fruit skin on the boy’s teeth. No mystery about it.”

“Possibly not, but you’re not going to tell me that three doctors are going to sign a certificate stating it was natural death. An Inquest’s inevitable. They may call it misadventure, or they may not, but they’ll do a pretty close enquiry.”

“Let them. I still say it’s plain enough. My God! this house has been like a lunatic asylum!” burst out the older man. “Judith’s been next door to raving and they’ve doped her to keep her quiet, and the servants have been scuttling round like idiots, gibbering in corners. When I remember how peaceful this house used to be—I’m beginning to wonder if it’ll ever be peaceful again.”

“You may well wonder,” said Standish. “How do you think the police are going to like this? They haven’t forgotten the last packet of trouble.”

“What’s that got to do with it?” demanded Vanstead irritably. “I tell you the facts are plain enough. The boy found the stuff growing, liked the look of the berries and ate them——”

“And I tell you he did *not* find the stuff growing,” said Standish. “Not in Bury Wood, anyway. Because it doesn’t grow there.”

There was a second of tense silence. Then Vanstead said:

“You mean that you don’t know it grew there. Are you prepared to swear to every weed that grows in that undergrowth? and if you are, who’s going to believe you?”

“It doesn’t matter what I swear,” retorted Standish. “The police won’t take my word for it. They’ll look for themselves, and they won’t find it. There isn’t any to find.”

“Look here, Standish, are you just trying to be difficult?”

“I’m not trying to be anything. I’m trying to face facts, and I don’t like the look of them much. You say the boy died from eating nightshade berries, *Atropa belladonna*. The first question that will be asked is ‘Where and how did he find them?’ If you know the answer to that one, I do not. If I had believed there was *Atropa belladonna* growing in that wood, do you think I should have let those two kids go blackberrying there without warning them? The girl had some sense, even if Alan hadn’t. Incidentally, have you found out how she is? Was she poisoned too?”

“No. The girl’s all right. She had, as you say, a modicum of sense. Alan hadn’t. As for your statement that the stuff doesn’t grow there, I’ve no doubt you make the statement in good faith, but I simply don’t believe you. You can say you’ve never seen it. I’ll believe that, but the other’s just ridiculous.”

Walter Vanstead took another cigar and lighted it while Standish stood by the fire in silence. “There’s another point, Standish.” The older man’s voice was sharp. “Things are troublesome enough without making them worse. If you want to be difficult—well, I have no doubt there are other people who will appreciate your valuable services. You are getting too arrogant for this household. If you persist in this attitude I shall tell my brother frankly that we find your presence here the reverse of helpful.”

“That I can well believe, sir, but it won’t make any difference to the situation,” replied Standish. “The fact that I have just been sacked will not prevent the police calling me at the Inquest. And neither the police, nor the Coroner, nor you yourself, can disprove the fact that I have a better working knowledge of the flora of this locality than have the majority of field naturalists. I’m no expert, but I’m a collector and if I am called upon to give evidence I shall be able to claim some standing.”

He put down his glass and turned towards the door, but Vanstead spoke sharply. "This won't do, Standish. By God, it won't! You have started this argument and you can go through with it. You state this weed didn't grow anywhere where the boy could have picked it. Then how did it come to be found in his pockets?"

"I don't know, and I don't pretend to know," replied Standish.

"Very good. There is only one assumption. It was put there for him to find, or else given to him deliberately. Of the persons concerned, who would be most likely to know where deadly nightshade could be found?"

Standish stood with his hands in his pockets. "Yes. I follow that argument," he replied with a smile, "The answer is myself. I know the plant, I know where it can be found. But it is not a difficult plant to identify. Any decent encyclopaedia gives an illustration of it. You have taken me to task, sir, for being difficult. It occurs to me that we are none of us in a position which makes it advisable to accuse one another. When I remind you that you—and Beach—were both in the wood this morning, I don't do it in order to accuse you of anything. Far from it. I simply state a fact. *Atropa belladonna* does not grow in that part of the wood where the children were playing. That is another fact. But the berries of that plant were found in Alan's pockets, which is a third fact. All this will be substantiated by the police, who are very painstaking and thorough in collating evidence. I suggest we should leave it to them to interpret that evidence."

Walter Vanstead gave a short laugh. "With your final statement, at least, I am in complete agreement, Standish."

"Very good, sir. Before I go, I should like to say this. It is not to my interest to make difficulties for anybody in a household which has shown me every kindness. But I do know this: in any police enquiry, to pretend ignorance of a fact which it can reasonably be assumed that you know is to ask to be disbelieved. Good night, sir."

5

It was in the small hours that Farmer Craddock banged on the door of the constabulary, and after a lot of trouble succeeded in rousing William Tupper, the village constable.

"William," bawled Craddock, "reckon there's a fire up yonder, over the brow o' the hill. In the woods, that be. Do you be goin' to do aught about it? That might spread, that might. Wholly dry that woodland be."

Tupper leaned out of the window. "That's a job for the fire brigade," he said hopefully.

"Fire brigade be blowed! What can they do? There's no water up there. Seems to me we'd better do summat ourselves. I'll call my lads, and do you collect a few chaps. That might spread. Better beat it out afore it gits beyond us. Hurry you, now."

Tupper was constitutionally incapable of hurrying, but he did his best: he roused some stalwarts from the inn and they panted up towards Bury Wood.

"'Tis not that bad. Picnickers, likely, them and their blasted picnic fires," said the village postman, "'Tis nought but a poor bit o' woodland, neither."

"You beat along by that hedge, Tom Pratt, and not so much lip," ordered Tupper. "Reckon I'll go and dig along o' Craddock. There's not much wind, thanks be. Us'll soon settle this—and no poaching, mind you. 'Tis Sir Charles's land."

"Poaching be damned! If I find a roast pheasant, finding's keepings this night." Pratt grinned. "Hey there, boy, look sharp. . ."

Tupper turned a deaf ear. If so be hares and suchlike did come under the beaters' sticks, who could blame the chaps? Certainly not Tupper.

Chapter 9

1

“Well, there you have it, Chief. I only wish we’d got you here for the first instalment,” said Inspector Young. “I felt in my bones there was something wrong, and so did Brown, but what could we do on the evidence? Everyone said, ‘Just what was to be expected.’”

“We’re tarred with the same brush, Young. We both hate these cases which conform to expectations,” replied Chief Inspector Macdonald. “All the same, I agree with you in regretting that your Chief Constable didn’t report to us in the first case, but it’s no use crying over spilt milk. The trouble now is that we start with a bias. Whereas in the first case, when Gerald Vanstead was killed, the village folk all said ‘Just what we expected,’ now it’s ourselves—the police—who’re inclined to say the same thing about the boy’s death. And to start with a bias is the very devil.”

Inspector Young bit back the hasty words which came all too easily to his tongue, and studied the other man thoughtfully. Chief Inspector Macdonald, C.I.D., was a tall, lean fellow, black-haired, grey-eyed, his skin as tanned as a farmer’s, his broad shoulders and long limbs those of an athlete. Young had seen Macdonald once before, ten years ago, but so far as he could judge those ten years had done nothing to age the C.I.D. man; there was something serene about him, a quality of stability and balance, which showed in his unlined face and healthy skin, as well as in the way he stood and moved. That Macdonald was a character, Young knew well enough; a man who went his own way, indifferent to promotion, sometimes a thorn in the flesh to superior officers because of his essential independence, but possessed of a judgment and tenacity which had made him a terror to those he pursued.

“Yes, I know you’re right, Chief,” admitted Young, “but put it this way. I admit our bias, but if it hadn’t existed, that kid would have been buried before you’d heard of him. Death from misadventure. R.I.P.”

Macdonald laughed. “Yes. You’ve made your point, I admit that. Now I’ve read your report and I reckon I could pass an examination on it. Have you got Sergeant Brown here?”

“He’s here, Chief, longing to say his bit. You may think he’s got a one-way mind, but he uses it.”

“Well, Sergeant,” said Macdonald a moment later. “I’m told you’ve got a one-way mind. I invite you to say all you’d like to say, without fear or favour, as the phrase goes.”

Something in the quality of Macdonald’s voice made Brown relax his official pose of strict attention. “Yes, sir. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—only we can’t generally put it all in when we’re in the box, if you see what I mean, sir. I believe it’s the truth that Beach, the chauffeur, caused Mr. Gerald Vanstead’s death.”

“Why do you believe that?” asked Macdonald. “I’ve read the Inspector’s report. I know that so far as the mechanics of it go, Beach *could* have done it, but that’s not the same as believing that he did do it.”

“No, sir,” said Brown soberly. “It’s something about the man himself, sir. There’s not many chaps I’ve known who would be capable of planning murder, but I believe Beach would. He’s hard and calculating and deliberate. And I saw his face when I’d been speaking to that young Alan, sir——”

“That’s a bit which isn’t in the official report, Brown, so tell me about it fully, in your own lingo.”

“Only too glad, sir. I always believed that kid could have told us a bit about the motor smash, if we’d only been given the chance to talk to him. I’ve got nippers of my own and I’m used to kids. I like them. I wouldn’t have done the boy any harm if they’d let me talk to him my own way. I don’t believe Gerald Vanstead drove down that hill without saying something: he must have known if those brakes had been mucked about with after he left them. Wouldn’t he have let out a blast or damn or whatnot?—and the kid would have heard. But they got the psychologist to say the boy’s brain would turn if he were questioned by the police. These psychologists, sir, they damn well don’t give a blue hoot about who murders who; it’s just an interesting case to them, not justice.”

Macdonald laughed. “Well, I admit I’ve felt the same myself sometimes, Brown, but psychiatry is a young science, and maybe you and I don’t keep pace with modern thought.”

“Maybe I don’t, sir, but kids haven’t changed that much since we were kids ourselves. Well, anyway, we couldn’t get at the boy any way that was any use. Always someone there to ‘protect’ him—make a muff of him, if you ask me. Now the boy’s been staying at Templedean since the beginning of the month, and a fair young devil he was, if you’ll believe me, sir. Cruel’s not the word for it. He’d torture anything. Apart from his little fun throwing stones and chasing the sheep, I heard he’d shut some cats up in a hen coop and tried to set fire to the straw he’d put round them. One of the farm workers’ wives caught him and told me about it. So I went up to the Place—I’d got a reason to go, to count the new beehives—and I found young Alan in the kitchen garden, stealing peaches. I told him I’d heard what he did, sir, and I put the fear of God into him, and then, if you please, that Beach comes up behind us, and I saw his face. He was frightened, sir, I swear he was, but he gave me a fair mouthful of his lip. Told me I’d no right to be there, and he’d report me, and I’d no business to be bullying the little boy and there’d be trouble coming to me for it.”

“You say he was frightened, Brown. Why?”

“Because he found me talking to Alan, sir. Beach knew we’d wanted to question the kid before the Inquest, and he knew we weren’t allowed, and I reckon he thanked his lucky stars we weren’t. I bet that kid heard something he could have told us, and Beach thought of that too. When he saw me talking to the boy, he was properly rattled, sir. And I may be no believer in psychology, but I haven’t been on the Force for over twenty years without knowing when a chap’s frightened, sir.”

Macdonald nodded. “Yes. I believe that,” he said quietly. “You fellows get a feeling for that sort of reaction. I know. I can always tell when a witness is frightened. What did you do then?”

“Young Alan skidaddled off, sir, as fast as his little sticks of legs would take him, and after I’d said a few words to Beach, I went up to the house and asked to see Miss Vanstead. She’s a very fair, reasonable lady, Miss Judith is. I told her the facts and she was properly horrified, but she was very decent about it. She said she knew what Alan was like, and she’d promise that he shouldn’t be let out alone again, not till he went back to school. I was really sorry for her, sir. She said nobody knew the sort of time she’d had with that boy, but she’d thought it her duty to have him back home and try to make a more normal child of him.”

“Did you mention Beach?” asked Macdonald.

“I did, sir, and she said that old servants got like that, a bit too big for their boots, and she’d take it kindly if I passed it over. Then she added that she’d every reason to think well of

the police, sir, and that we'd been considerate to her when she was so unhappy, and she wouldn't hear a word against us. You couldn't have met anybody nicer than she was, or more understanding. She did remind me about young Alan's history, sir, and spoke of the hideous things he'd seen in that prison camp, and said it wasn't surprising his mind was all twisted."

"That's perfectly true," said Macdonald. "She sounds a sensible woman, though it's probable she made a mistake in having the boy home. Maladjusted children need trained people to deal with them. Now, having thought it all over, Brown, what conclusion have you come to?"

"I feel bad over it, sir. Seems to me, all unthinking, I was the cause of that boy's death." Brown spoke deliberately, but his square face was very troubled. Macdonald said:

"Go on. You'd better state your own argument."

"It sticks out a mile, sir. Beach saw me talking to that kid. He wasn't going to risk that happening again, so he took the first opportunity of poisoning him."

2

"Well, Brown, the Inspector said you had a one-way mind, but you'd used it to good effect. I agree. You've thought things out and you've stated a logical case, but you've left a lot of factors out. Beach wasn't the only person who stood to profit by Gerald Vanstead's death."

"That's what I say, Chief," put in Young. "At the same time I think that Brown's done some clear thinking about the *cause* of the boy's death. I agree with Brown that it's probable Alan was deliberately poisoned, and the motive for it was to safeguard the person who caused his father's death. You see, the two cases are alike in this way: the murderer utilised the known weakness of his victim. In the father's case it was dangerous driving; in the boy's case it was plain greed. If Alan had been offered some of those berries and told they were good, he'd have crammed them down like he did the garden peaches."

"Quite probably; and I know from your report that Beach was in Bury Wood when the children were playing there," said Macdonald, "but Beach wouldn't have given Alan berries to eat while the other child was there. You say that Caroline was a sensible sort of child, and a good witness. She would have remembered if the chauffeur had come and spoken to Alan. Children are generally very good witnesses over points like that."

Brown nodded. "That's true enough, sir, but couldn't Beach have told Alan that there was a particular sort of blackberry growing in that wood which was specially good? So far as I could make out, Beach had been 'sucking up' to Alan, as the kids say, flattering him and calling him 'the little master.'"

Macdonald shook his head. "Not very convincing. What I'd call too chancy. It's much more likely the child was given the berries before he left home. The experts can never state with any certainty the time which elapses before these vegetable poisons take effect. Now it appears that Miss Vanstead and Mr. Standish started for the picnic first, as they had to make a considerable detour to reach the wood in the car."

"That's right, sir. The pony cart took the forester's track and went over the brook, but you can't take a car that way, the track's too rough, and there's a risk the car would bog down at the brook. That's all O.K., sir," said Brown.

"Right. Now Alan was left alone for about five minutes, until Miss Hobart and the pony outfit arrived. Was anybody in charge of him?"

“There was Denton, the gardener, working on the terrace; he’d have kept an eye on the boy all right, seeing the damage he’d done in the garden at other times.”

“Very good. Denton was on the terrace: the front door was open, I take it. Anybody about in the entrance hall?”

“The butler was fussing around, Chief,” replied Young. “Miss Vanstead had asked him to see that the boy waited by the front door. She said she thought Alan might make friends with the other child more easily if she wasn’t there to watch them. I’m damned sorry for Miss Vanstead. Everybody in the house says she’s slaved for that boy, kept her temper, done her best to make him happy, put herself out for him every way. It’s a miserable story, whichever way you look at it.”

Macdonald nodded. “It is that.” He sat and pondered for a moment and then went on: “I asked Brown to give me his own opinion about Beach. Now I’m asking you both if you’ve anything to add about Herbert Standish. Young?”

“Well, he’s the sort of man I don’t cotton onto myself,” said Young. “One of these academic cusses, tends to look down his nose at everybody. Interrogating him is hard work, because he only answers yes or no, or I don’t know. Generally the latter. His great idea is to say as little as possible. You’ll remember I wrote in my report about that telegraph linesman who overheard Barton and Standish talking in the park? Well, Standish never let on a word about that conversation. In evidence he stated that he’d never been in the Stanhall with Gerald Vanstead and knew nothing about his driving at firsthand and he wasn’t going to repeat hearsay. In this last case he said he’d gone to the picnic because Miss Vanstead asked him, but he hadn’t seen the children when they were playing in the wood. He’d been on the far side of the wood, looking at a badger set. *But* Standish went up to Bury Wood after sunset that same evening, photographing his precious badgers, and that same wood was afire a couple of hours later. If you want my private opinion, Chief, I feel about Standish as Brown feels about Beach, and that’s flat.”

“That’s clear enough,” said Macdonald. “Anything to add, either of you?”

“Yes, Chief,” replied Young. “I think Brown’s right in his explanation of why the boy was killed. It’s because Alan could have told us something which would have thrown light on the car smash. Now the boy’s dead, we’re sunk. We can’t get any further, unless we can find out who killed the boy. And that’s where you come in. We’ve done our best, but it’s got us nowhere.”

“I wouldn’t say that. You’ve done the spadework for me,” said Macdonald, “and I’ll see you get the credit for it.”

3

“Chief Inspector Macdonald, sir.”

Herbert Standish looked up from his writing as the butler made his announcement in a lugubrious voice, and Macdonald was able to study the face of the man seated at the desk. Standish showed neither surprise nor consternation: he looked up blankly, took off his spectacles, blotted his page carefully, and said:

“Yes? You want to see me? Please sit down.”

His voice held a hint of irritation, and he put his papers together carefully as the butler closed the door and Macdonald seated himself beside the desk.

"I am an officer of the Criminal Investigation Department, Mr. Standish. We have been approached by the Chief Constable to co-operate in the enquiry about Alan Vanstead's death."

"I see." With his hands clasped lightly on the desk in front of him, Standish waited.

"It is assumed by the doctors that the boy's death was caused by eating the berries of deadly nightshade," went on Macdonald evenly, "but we want evidence of how those berries were obtained by the boy. I have been told that you are a naturalist of some standing, and that you have studied the flora of this district."

"As a naturalist I have no more status than that of an amateur," replied Standish dryly. "I am interested in plants and general ecology, but the only subject in which I am really qualified is economics."

Macdonald smiled. "A subject whose general application is occasionally relevant to my department," he replied, "but the chief question I want to put to you is this: have you ever found deadly nightshade, *Atropa belladonna*, growing in Bury Wood?"

"No, I have not. But that is not the same as saying that it has never grown there."

"Admittedly. Would you, as an observer of plant life, have expected to find deadly nightshade growing in that wood?"

"I should not," replied Standish concisely. "As a Chief Inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department you doubtless have access to standard books of reference: in addition you can ask for an expert opinion from any botanist of standing. When you ask for an opinion from me, all I can do is to quote those authorities I have read. *Atropa belladonna* is found on chalk or limestone, most frequently on waste ground and in the vicinity of old buildings or ruins. The Cotswold Oolite is not pure limestone, and the hills around here have a considerable admixture of silicious residue, not an ideal habitat for *Atropa belladonna*."

"Have you ever found the plant growing in this locality, within a radius of five miles, for example?"

"Yes, I have. I saw it last year, growing on the mound of a ruined cottage above Strangways—that is, roughly four miles from here. But I would remind you again that the fact that I have not found it closer at hand proves nothing. I have never actually looked for it. The plant is not rare, and is of no particular interest. It is not even unique in having poisonous properties."

Macdonald listened to the deliberate voice; it was precise, pedantic, toneless. Standish sat perfectly still, his light-coloured eyes looking beyond Macdonald, rather than at him. Was the man as indifferent as he appeared to be, or was his attitude a sort of camouflage?

"You say the plant is of no particular interest," observed Macdonald. "Was the child's life of no interest to you, either?"

The question at least caused Standish to focus his eyes on his interlocutor; he appeared to regard Macdonald with mild distaste, nothing more.

"The child was no concern of mine," he replied. "As you know, I am employed by Sir Charles Vanstead, and I share the life of his household. I deeply regret that the Vansteads have suffered further distress, but I fail to see that any question of yours can lessen that distress."

"There is only one point in my questions, and that is to arrive at the truth," replied Macdonald, "a process in which I expect co-operation from all responsible persons. Will you tell me your own opinion? Was it probable that Alan Vanstead found the berries of *Atropa belladonna* growing in Bury Wood?"

"I have already told you that I should not have expected to find it there myself, but I have never studied the flora of that wood in any detail. I have visited the north corner of the wood

fairly frequently, because I am interested in badgers, but it was not in this part of the wood the children were playing.”

“You were in Bury Wood on the evening of the child’s death?”

“Yes. I went there to take photographs of the badgers. I was there from nine o’clock until about half-past eleven.”

“Did you get your photographs?”

“I exposed a spool of film. It is not yet developed.”

“Would you allow me to have the film?”

“Certainly. I should be glad if you could return it to me when you have finished with it.”

“By all means. Can you hazard any opinion as to the cause of the fire which broke out in the wood?”

“No. I haven’t the least idea as to what caused it. I know that I did not do so, neither did I hear anything while I was there to indicate that there was anybody else in the wood. From the behaviour of the badgers, I am pretty certain there was nobody else there, neither was there any smell of burning.”

Macdonald sat silent for a short while, then he said: “The obvious supposition was that the boy found the poisonous berries in that part of the wood where he and Caroline Hobart were playing. Owing to the fire, it is now impossible to prove whether the berries did or did not grow there. Does that sequence of events suggest anything to you, Mr. Standish?”

“I don’t regard it as my business to speculate on the matter. I am not one of those who regard detection as a form of mental amusement. If I speculate at all, I do so from observed facts.”

“So do I,” replied Macdonald. “Behaviour can come under the heading of facts. In most investigations we find a considerable degree of similarity in the mental attitude of those we interrogate. Sudden death and a police enquiry into its cause stimulate interest in the normal person. I have no reason to regard you as abnormal, Mr. Standish, but your degree of indifference is abnormal.”

Standish made no reply, and Macdonald went on: “A child, living under the same roof as yourself, the grandson and heir of an employer who has shown you every kindness, is killed. The manner of his death is such that you, a naturalist, should be able to give some assistance to us. Yet in your answers to my questions there is a negative quality which seems to be calculated to save you any trouble and to safeguard you in every way. I think ‘calculated’ is a fair word, Mr. Standish. When you say that speculation is of no interest to you, I just don’t believe you. Every human being speculates over matters of this kind. It appears that the result of your speculation is a decision to safeguard yourself.”

Standish flushed a little, though he sat as still as ever. “I see no point in disputing your conclusions, Chief Inspector.”

“I can well believe that you regard caution as advisable, Mr. Standish. You are well acquainted with the appearance of *Atropa belladonna*. You know where to find it. You helped to pass the food at the picnic. You carried the boy to the car. You took him upstairs; you put him to bed. You suggested that Miss Vanstead was making too much fuss, and that the child had better be left alone. You spoke to Janet, the maid, in similar terms. Finally you went back to Bury Wood that same evening, and fire swept through the wood a few hours later. Do you dispute any of those facts, Mr. Standish?”

“I do not.”

“You used the word ‘conclusions’ just now,” went on Macdonald. “It is too early for me to use that word, but unless you are deliberately taking on yourself the position of suspect, I suggest that you assist me to arrive at the real facts of the case.”

Macdonald, from years of experience, knew that there were very few men, and those quite exceptional ones, who were capable of complete self-control when a case is outlined against them without any mitigation. The Chief Inspector did not regard Standish as an “exceptional” man; had he been so, it was doubtful, in Macdonald’s opinion, if he would have been satisfied with the post of secretary to a rich man. Standish probably had a keener intelligence and more information than the majority of men; he had found that reticence and an attitude of academic superiority had impressed most people. But now he was up against it, and his hands were trembling slightly, though he still had the nerve to remain silent.

“What is the nature of the substance which causes poisoning from the berries of deadly nightshade?” demanded Macdonald.

“Belladonna. Atropine, if you prefer that word,” replied Standish.

“You wear spectacles, so I take it you have consulted an oculist, who probably used atropine. What symptoms does it produce?”

“Dilation of the pupils of the eyes. If swallowed, it affects the throat, and eventually causes lack of muscular control.”

“You carried the child to the car, and eventually put him to bed. Did you notice his eyes?”

“His eyes were closed.”

Macdonald paused a moment, then went on: “All the time?”

“I believe so.”

“In other words, you carried an unconscious child to bed; you further advised that he be left alone——”

“He was not unconscious. He moved, and grumbled a little.”

“You had better be very careful here,” said Macdonald. “Are you prepared to swear that he spoke, even though his eyes were closed at the time?”

“Yes. He said he felt sick. . . .”

“It didn’t occur to you that a child whose eyes were closed, who had remained immobile while you carried him in your arms, might be very ill indeed?”

“No.”

“Well, Mr. Standish, some people may be willing to believe that you are as stupid as you make yourself out to be, but I think only a minority would be willing to believe it,” rejoined Macdonald.

Chapter 10

1

“I am very sorry to have to bother you with questions, Miss Vanstead. I realise just how unwelcome this enquiry must be, but I hope that you will agree that it is essential to get the full facts.”

Judith Vanstead looked at Macdonald with heavy eyes. “I should have thought the facts were painfully obvious,” she said wearily. “Of course I will do my best to answer your questions fully. If I am irritable, I would ask you to remember that this is the second time within a few months that this nightmare business of question and answer has been inflicted on us.”

“I should be the last person to forget that,” said Macdonald quietly. “Believe me, I do not wish to cause you further distress, but the fact that father and son both died an unnatural death cannot be ignored.”

“I don’t ignore it. I blame myself for both tragedies, particularly for Alan’s death. I was responsible for the child, and it was my fault that he died.”

“Would you like to explain exactly what you mean, just as the words come, without any interruption by questions of mine?” queried Macdonald. “If you can talk about it, it may help both of us.”

Judith leaned back in her chair and studied the man opposite to her. He wasn’t what she had expected. In neither voice nor manner did he resemble the official; there was sympathy and an easy courtesy about his speech which took the edge off the exasperation which she felt and which made it easy to accept his suggestion, and just talk.

“Very well. If you have the patience to listen to what may well be a rambling narrative, I will try to tell you what I mean,” she replied. “When my brother came back here from Australia, we didn’t hit it off very well. He disliked me, and it wasn’t all his fault. Because I was worried and unhappy about my father, I couldn’t be bothered to look at things from Gerald’s point of view. I avoided him as far as I could and took very little interest in him or his doings. When he bought a car I was glad, because it seemed better that he should be free to come and go as he liked without reference to other members of the household. I didn’t bother to remember what life had been like for him in the war years, what effect it must have had on him, nor even how long it was since he had driven on our hills round here. I knew he had been a bad driver long ago, but I didn’t remember that, either. I ought to have gone out with him and taken the trouble to see that he knew his way about, but I didn’t. It wasn’t until after he was killed that I thought about all those things. When I say that I blame myself for that appalling accident, I’m not being hysterical or sentimental. I’m just realising that if I hadn’t been so preoccupied it would never have happened. I could have stopped him driving, because Gerald couldn’t really stand up to me.”

“In blaming yourself, I think you ignore one possibility,” said Macdonald. “I don’t want to add to your burden of distress, but it does seem plain to me that there was no proof that your brother’s death was accidental. The verdict of accident was based on probabilities, but to my mind accident was not proven.”

“What do you mean?” she asked quickly.

“That the car might have been tampered with. Had not such a possibility occurred to you?”

“If it did, I dismissed it immediately,” she replied. “What you suggest is that my brother might have been murdered. I just don’t believe it. An impulse to murder must involve hatred. Gerald wasn’t the sort of man to arouse hatred. He irritated people, I know that, but irritation is very different from hatred.”

“It isn’t only hatred that leads to murder,” replied Macdonald quietly. “The sort of egoism which puts self-profit first is a more common motive than hatred. Isn’t it true that if your brother had inherited this estate, more than one person would have had reason to regret it?”

Judith frowned, her eyes very intent. “Perhaps I am a simpleton, but that aspect of the matter didn’t occur to me. Would you like to be more specific?”

“It was generally assumed—by current gossip—that your chauffeur profited by your brother’s death.”

“Beach? What an abominable thing to suggest! He has been a faithful servant to us for nearly thirty years. Beach is honest through and through. If Gerald disliked Beach, the reflection is on my brother. Beach was too outspoken, and Gerald was childish in nursing old grudges.” She looked at Macdonald with unhappy eyes, even as she shook her head. “No. I’m sure you’re wrong there. I know Beach, and I know he’s to be trusted. Besides, even the motive you suggest is baseless. Gerald would not have wanted Beach as chauffeur, any more than Beach would have been willing to stay with Gerald, but my father is not the type of man to let faithful service go unrewarded, and I myself am not indifferent to those who have worked for me. No. If there was any doubt about the verdict, it isn’t your explanation which has validity. That’s one horror which I can dismiss from my mind without hesitation.”

“I don’t want to stress the point,” replied Macdonald evenly, “but I thought it only fair to let you know what was in my mind. So let us get on to the present enquiry.”

“Yes. I can tell you this to start with. If I hadn’t woken up with a migraine headache that day, Alan would be alive now. I left him to Mr. Standish, and I still can’t imagine how I could have been so negligent. Standish is an intellectual, a mathematician; so far as children are concerned, he’s totally unobservant and uninterested. When he said he would put Alan to bed, I realised he was doing it out of kindness to me. I don’t often give way to small ills, but this time I did.”

“I should have thought any man could be trusted to put a small boy to bed,” said Macdonald. “Incidentally, who generally put him to bed?”

“I did. Before he came home I engaged a governess—quite a nice girl who I thought could play with him and take him on walks. I thought it was rather hard on a small boy to have only a middle-aged aunt to go about with. But it didn’t work. Alan was terribly difficult, and after the first two days Miss Grant came to me nearly in tears and said she couldn’t cope, so I let her go. After that, rather than have complaints from the servants, I looked after him myself. You see—he wasn’t a normal boy. . . .”

“Yes. I’ve gathered that. Sergeant Brown talked to me about him.”

Judith flushed. “The Sergeant was very fair and considerate. I’m afraid you must have got the impression that we didn’t look after Alan as well as we should have done, but he was very difficult to manage, and I was so anxious to avoid being heavy-handed, or seeming to be a tyrant.”

“It’s surprising how large a problem a problem child can be,” said Macdonald, and she threw him a grateful glance.

“It is indeed. You see, one bases one’s ideas of what children will do on one’s experience of normal children, and life was just full of unpleasant surprises.”

“I can well believe it. We, in the police, get some experience of maladjusted children, and it has sometimes occurred to me that the old phrase, ‘possessed by a devil’ still has cogency. Tell me, had you any previous trouble with him over eating unwholesome things?”

“No, not really. He stole fruit from the gardens and greenhouses, and often destroyed more than he ate. The gardeners were very bitter about it. I told them to keep the greenhouses locked.”

“Did he go about by himself?”

“Not very much. You see, he had no stamina and got tired easily, so he didn’t walk far. And since that appalling accident when my brother was killed, nothing would induce him to go in a car. The school people warned me about that, and I had to get one of the farmers to bring him from the station in one of their carts. We haven’t got any horses here now—I haven’t ridden since 1939. I don’t think he ever went outside the park by himself, except when he got into Bailley’s farmyard once, and since the Sergeant came to see me, I hardly let Alan out of my sight.”

“Would you describe him as a sickly child?”

“Alan? Good heavens, yes—literally. He was always being sick. He used it as a defence mechanism. If I corrected him, or thwarted him, or even refused to let him have too many sweets, he made himself sick. It was because of that fact that I didn’t worry overmuch about the picnic debacle. I thought he had done it because he was jealous of Caroline, poor little boy. You see, he was such a duffer; he was no good at lessons and no good at games, and he was a born funk and crybaby. So in order to get notice taken of him he contrived to be sick. You can’t imagine the scenes I’ve had with him. He preferred to do it when there were people about. You can guess how the servants felt about him, and yet in spite of everything I was fond of him. He was such a pathetic lonely little object. Nobody liked him except myself. Nobody could like him, and since he has died, everybody’s said it was a merciful thing—only I don’t see it like that. I wanted to make up to him for all the horrors he’d suffered——” Her voice broke, and she blinked away the tears on her thick lashes. “I’m sorry, Chief Inspector. You encouraged me to talk and I’m afraid I’ve just run on.”

“You have given me a clear idea of a difficult situation,” said Macdonald quietly. “I had wondered why you hadn’t engaged somebody to help look after the child, and why it was that it was Mr. Standish who put him to bed after the picnic. I understand all that now. But can you tell me a little more about the boy’s condition when he rejoined you after playing in the wood. Did he seem really ill?”

“He looked awful,” she replied, “but then he so often looked awful. He always went that horrible greenish colour when he was sick, and his eyes seemed to go back into his head. He flopped down on a rug, and wouldn’t answer when I spoke to him. Then Mr. Standish lifted him up. I was surprised, because it was the first time I’d ever seen him being kind to Alan, and he was kind this time, very gentle and comforting. When I got to the car, he’d tucked Alan along the back seat, with a rug over him, and said to me, ‘I think he’ll go to sleep, poor little beggar—don’t wake him.’ I sat on the edge of the back seat, to steady Alan, and when we got home Standish carried him upstairs and said he’d put him to bed. I was so grateful, the more so because I tripped on the stairs and came down rather heavily. I slipped on a fruit skin, one of those awful berries, I suppose. It must have fallen out of Alan’s pocket.”

“Did it seem odd to you that the boy slept so soundly? He didn’t wake up when Standish lifted him out of the car, for instance?”

“No, but I wasn’t surprised at that. It was quite usual for him to fall asleep after a bout of sickness or temper. If you ask the psychologists, they’ll tell you it was part of his mental disorder. If things went against him, his subconscious mind urged him to let go, and just sleep.”

Macdonald smiled. “Yes. I’ve met that explanation before. I suppose Alan’s peculiarities were common knowledge to everybody here?”

“I expect so. I had to do rather a lot of explaining,” she said wearily.

“And I expect you’re very tired of explaining,” said Macdonald. “Just tell me this, and I won’t bother you any more. Did the school psychiatrist try to dissuade you from having the boy back home?”

She nodded, and her face flushed. “Yes. They said it was a mistake, and would only upset him, but I wouldn’t believe them.” She paused and then said slowly: “I told you it was all my fault. Now you know why I feel so bad about it. If I’d left him at school he would still be alive.”

2

As Macdonald crossed the hall towards the front door, a white-coated manservant hurried towards him, saying: “Excuse me, sir. Sir Charles Vanstead wishes to see you.”

Macdonald halted in some surprise. “I thought Sir Charles was too ill to see visitors.”

“Quite true, sir. The doctor wouldn’t have it, but when Sir Charles gives an order, it’s not for me to argue, sir. He told me to come straight to you, and not to mention it to Miss Judith. If you’ll just come upstairs, sir?”

“Of course,” rejoined Macdonald. “How did he know I was in the house?”

Stubbs led the way upstairs. “I don’t know, sir, but there’s not much goes on here that Sir Charles doesn’t know. It often surprises us. He’s still got marvellous keen hearing; lying there so still I believe he listens to everything, and the windows are all open. He hears a sight more than I do.”

When Macdonald went up to the bed in the beautiful airy room where Sir Charles Vanstead lay, the old man said: “Sit down. You can go, Stubbs. If I want you I’ll ring, and tell Nurse Dormer I don’t want her before tea time.” His low voice was perfectly clear. Macdonald sat down in a chair beside the bed and Sir Charles Vanstead said:

“You’re a C.I.D. man. I sent for you because I’ve a right to know what’s going on in my house. I may be a dying man, but I’m not senile. And remember this: the one thing I will not tolerate is being treated as a child—spared, as they like to say. I demand a clear statement from you of your reason for being here. My son was killed. My grandson has been killed. And you are here. I want an explanation.”

Macdonald met the resolute old eyes and marvelled that a man so wasted could yet speak with such authority.

“Very good, sir. I am here because the local men were not convinced that the verdict of accident on your son’s death was a sound verdict. When the child died, the Chief Constable asked for a Yard man in order to have the fullest possible enquiry.”

“Go on,” insisted the faint voice from the bed. “I want the facts, and you’re the only person who’s got the sense to tell me the facts. Plain and unvarnished, please.”

“It’s the lack of facts that’s our trouble, sir. Mr. Vanstead might have made a mess of his own brakes, or might not. I think it’s improbable that I shall be able to find out anything more about that than the local men did.”

“Then why did they send for you?”

“Because there was a possibility that the child’s death is connected with the previous case. Sergeant Brown had reason to come up here to speak to Alan about maltreating some animals. Brown has always believed the boy might have been able to tell something germane to the motor crash problem, but the psychologists refused to allow him to be questioned. It’s possible that someone feared that the child might give evidence to the police.”

Even as he spoke, Macdonald was surprised at the impulse in his own mind which caused him to speak so plainly to this dying man, but there was something compelling about the personality which emanated from the emaciated frame and faint voice. “I have a right to know what’s going on in my house,” he had said, and Macdonald admitted the claim.

“That’s the first bit of common sense I’ve heard about the matter,” went on Sir Charles, his voice cold and unemotional. “Lying here, waiting for the end, I’ve plenty of time to think. I’m past feeling, but I can still think, and I can listen. You hear a surprising lot if you listen instead of talking. Why was Gerald killed?”

“I don’t know that he *was* killed, sir, but he certainly aroused enmity. He said too often and too clearly that he intended to get rid of everybody pertaining to the old regime when he inherited.”

The faintest sound of scornful mirth came from the old man. “‘A clean sweep.’ I’ve heard his voice saying it. Gerald was born a fool, but I’m afraid we never gave him a chance. We haven’t run to fools in this family. You’ve got quite a bunch to choose from, Chief Inspector.”

“Quite a bunch,” agreed Macdonald, “but the whole thing is hypothetical.”

“Hypothetical or not, my male issue is eradicated. There’s only Judith left, and Judith is the most intelligent of the lot. What are you doing to see that the same thing doesn’t happen to her, eh?”

“There’s not much I can do,” said Macdonald. “Since she’s intelligent, she may realise what you have realised, but I don’t think she’s willing to face the matter in the realistic spirit that you do, sir.”

“I find that dying clarifies the mind,” replied the remarkable old man. “Of course I could order a clean sweep myself—Beach and Saunders and Standish, and that nice chap Barton—and Walter. Walter’s got a son of his own, you know, and not all that to leave him. He was always an extravagant chap. There’s not much I haven’t looked in the face these past days.”

“I realise that, sir. You mention Beach. You have known him for a long time. I should value your opinion of him.”

“He’s a good chauffeur and he’s given me good service. He’s been honest, reliable and punctual and never let me down. He hated Gerald, not without reason, and he’s as hard as nails. But I had him up here and questioned him. Judith doesn’t know that, and there’s no need to tell her. Beach is religious in a primitive way. He swore to me on his own Testament that he’d never touched Gerald’s car. In my opinion he wouldn’t have dared do that if it hadn’t been true. He’d have lied in court, or to you, but not to me, as I am now. The fellow was in a sweat, but he swore on his Bible—and he believes in hell.”

The faint voice nearly died away, and Macdonald feared that the effort of speech had been too great for him.

“You’re tired, sir. I mustn’t weary you like this.”

“Don’t go. Not yet. You’ve been straight with me and I’ll be straight with you. If anybody meddled with that car, Beach probably knows. If it’d been Standish, he’d have told. He hates Standish. But he wouldn’t have told if it was Walter.” Again the thread of sound faltered, and then began again. “It’s a hard thing to say of my own brother . . . and I don’t know. But see to it. That child . . . sticks in my throat. Gerald was a fool . . . but the child . . .”

“Yes,” said Macdonald quietly. “I’ll do my best, sir.” He got up, and Sir Charles said:

“And, for God’s sake, come and tell me—when you’ve got anything to tell. Don’t be afraid. I’ve still got my wits.”

At that moment the door opened and an indignant nurse came in, glaring at Macdonald.

The old man said: “All right, Nurse. I sent for him. Don’t try to bully me.”

3

Macdonald walked along the panelled corridor until he came to the main landing. Instead of going downstairs he walked to the front of the house, where the mullioned windows all stood open to the golden September sunshine. Leaning against the mullions, the C.I.D. man stood deep in thought, but at the same time he listened. His own hearing was very acute, and he was interested in the fact that the element of listening seemed to have a part to play in this case. Sir Charles Vanstead lay, as still as an effigy in a tomb, and nearly as pallid, but he listened. It was very quiet on that glowing afternoon; harvest was over, and the tractors were silent for a short spell. The only bird song was the tiny crystal-clear song of some robins. As he stood there Macdonald began to pick out the sound of quiet voices; Judith’s was one of them, a soft contralto, answered by a quicker, higher-toned voice, probably the nurse’s. . . . Then a man’s voice in the hall below, curt, authoritative, answered by the butler’s throaty acquiescence. Macdonald picked out a sharp question: “Who?” and the mumbled answer:

“A C.I.D. man, sir.”

“Of all the damned impertinence . . . insufferable. . . .”

The voice faded out, and footsteps began to mount the stairs. Macdonald stayed by the window, and shortly was face to face with a well-groomed elderly man.

“May I ask who you are, and what you are doing here?” snapped the latter.

“I am an officer of the Criminal Investigation Department and I am here on duty,” replied Macdonald quietly.

“Is it any part of your duty to eavesdrop at windows in private houses?”

“Quite frequently, sir,” replied Macdonald. “Are you Mr. Walter Vanstead?”

“I am, and I strongly resent your intrusion. My brother is a dying man.”

“A fact of which, fortunately for himself, he is fully aware,” replied Macdonald. “May I suggest we continue this conversation elsewhere, sir? It would be less disturbing to Sir Charles. His hearing is very acute, and his bedroom windows are wide open.”

Walter Vanstead stared angrily at this interloper, whose deep voice spoke hardly above a murmur, and who seemed to be totally unaware of the wrath directed at him. Without waiting for an answer, Macdonald moved towards the stairs and began to descend. As he expected, Walter Vanstead followed him. “Reaction normal: angry but inquisitive,” noted Macdonald to himself. “If he hadn’t followed me, the trick would have been to him.”

When he reached the hall, Macdonald waited, and Vanstead walked ahead of him and opened a door.

“In here,” he snapped. “And now will you justify your intrusion into my brother’s sick room?”

Macdonald followed him into the room, crossed over to the mullioned windows and deliberately closed them. “I don’t think you realise how voices carry when all the windows are open, sir. Now, if you have a complaint against me, will you state it?”

“I shall complain to your superior officers. No detective has the right to force himself on a dying man.”

“There are many times when a detective has to interrogate a dying man,” replied Macdonald, “but the only compulsion in this case was Sir Charles Vanstead’s own wish. He sent for me, and in going to him I obeyed his wish. One of the first things he said to me was ‘I am not senile, and I have the right to know what has been going on in my house.’ Therein I agreed with him. However frail his body, his intelligence is still formidable. I think that he has a much clearer conception of what has been going on here than anybody else in this house. In his case, the knowledge of approaching death gives him the quality of freedom from bias.”

Walter Vanstead still stared angrily and snapped back: “Do you realise that you may have exhausted his strength, so that death may result much sooner than need have been the case?”

“A man’s life is his own, sir, and your brother has the right to use his remaining strength as he wishes. I should not have had the obtuseness nor the hypocrisy to disregard his wish to discuss this matter. Moreover, in my judgment—and I have watched approaching death many times—Sir Charles has a considerable reserve of vitality. He won’t die tonight, for instance, unless his death is brought about by other than natural causes.”

That startled Walter Vanstead; startled him so that his monocle dropped with a rattle as his brows shot up. “What the hell do you mean?” he demanded.

“Among the cogent questions your brother asked me, sir, I was struck by this one: ‘What are you doing to ensure the same thing doesn’t happen to Judith?’ It occurred to me that this same thing might happen to him—so much more easily.”

Walter Vanstead’s face settled into grim, hard lines. “Let us get this clear,” he said. “You have suggested that there is a murderer in this house. You had better state whom you suspect, and I shall see to it that you are held responsible for your answer.”

“It is no part of my duty to state my own suspicions to anybody but my superior officers,” replied Macdonald. “I have quoted to you the words Sir Charles Vanstead spoke to me, and I followed them by their logical implication, because I thought that it was desirable you should understand it. I would further suggest this precaution, that for the time being no one but his nurse, his man servant and his doctor should be left alone with Sir Charles. That is a plain warning, sir. If it is disregarded, I do not hold myself responsible for the consequences. Have you the authority to ensure that my advice is followed?”

“I do not admit that you are in a position to give orders here.”

“Very well. I will report your objection and put the matter in the hands of the Commissioner. I am not speaking lightly, Mr. Vanstead.”

It seemed as though Walter Vanstead realised at last that it was no good trying to browbeat the Chief Inspector. With a slight shrug of his shoulders, the older man began to speak again in less aggressive accents.

“Very well. I understand that you suspect the presence of a murderer amongst us. It is, perhaps, not unnatural that we are shocked by what seems to us a farfetched explanation of two very deplorable accidents. I would remind you that the Coroner’s Jury, after an exhaustive enquiry, were satisfied that my nephew’s death was accidental, caused by his own lack of

elementary care and attention in driving. The doctors are satisfied that the boy Alan died from atropine poisoning, consequent on eating the berries of *Atropa belladonna* found in his pocket. Your assumption, I gather, is that those berries were deliberately given to him to eat with murderous intent. Are you now suggesting that my brother is also to be induced to eat the berries of *Atropa belladonna*?"

"Not of necessity the berries," replied Macdonald. "Until I have received the results of the post mortem on the boy, I can not be certain that his death was caused by the nightshade berries. It is conceivable that the berries were put in his pocket to provide a convincing explanation of accidental death. In other words, there may be more subtlety in the matter than is at first apparent."

Vanstead stood very still, frowning heavily. "That suggestion may throw a fresh light on the matter, but it is, I take it, purely hypothetical. Nevertheless, if you are seeking one person in this household who is likely to have knowledge of vegetable poisons, I suggest that problem is not difficult to elucidate."

"The trouble throughout these two cases, sir, has been too great a willingness to accept obvious explanations," replied Macdonald. "I think I am justified in reminding you of your own insistence on the accidental nature of death in both cases. It is my business to guard against any further accidents."

Again Vanstead was silent, but this time he was very deep in thought. The two men stood there, as the clock ticked on, and Macdonald wondered if he could read the other man's thoughts, or vice versa. Gerald Vanstead was dead, Alan was dead, and Sir Charles himself in a condition such that death could come about very easily. Walter Vanstead spoke again, abruptly:

"Very well. I will accept the necessity for your precautions, but I maintain that your basis of argument is purely hypothetical."

"In the early stages of every investigation action has to be taken on a hypothesis until the facts emerge," replied Macdonald.

Chapter 11

1

“I repeat, I simply do not understand you.”

Macdonald was talking to Judith again, after Walter Vanstead had stormed in vain against the C.I.D. man’s unwarrantable interference. To Judith, Macdonald had repeated the advice which had so incensed her uncle.

“Then I will put things so plainly that you won’t be able to avoid understanding them, Miss Vanstead. I am here to investigate the possibility that two murders have been committed. Your father agrees with me that there is more than a possibility that both his son and his grandson have been murdered. Frail though he is, dying though he knows himself to be, your father’s intelligence is unimpaired. He has thought a great deal about this problem, and I think it is not improbable that he has an idea of what actually happened. Now I ask you to remember that your nephew died not long after Sergeant Brown was seen talking to him. I am trying to ensure that your father is not done to death because it is known that he has been consulting with me. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, you do. Almost brutally so. And to safeguard my father’s life, you are including me among your suspects. Do you think that is justifiable? Ask the doctor or nurses—ask anybody. They will tell you that I have done everything that any daughter could do for my father.”

“I know,” replied Macdonald quietly. “And you must do one thing more. If it is known that you accept the conditions I suggest for safeguarding your father, nobody else can argue or complain; nobody can ask to be made an exception if you yourself are not an exception.”

“But if he asks for me, if he wants me, can’t you see that what you suggest is intolerable? I am the one person who has his entire confidence, whom he can trust. Do you think it is an easy thing for him to lie there, thinking about this hideous possibility which you have suggested?”

“No, I don’t, but I’m pretty sure of this,” replied Macdonald. “If his doctor tells your father what I have asked should be done, your father will agree. He is a realist, and his mind is as clear as ever it was.”

“He will agree, certainly. He always agrees when it is a matter of saving other people trouble and distress, but you are adding the burden of intolerable loneliness to all that he has to suffer already.”

“I hope you will forgive me when I say this, Miss Vanstead. Because you feel so acutely his physical exhaustion and suffering, you tend to underestimate the independence of his mind and will. There is something in him which defeats and defies loneliness and depression.”

“You know nothing about him!” she cried. “It is an impertinence that you, who have seen him only once, should lecture me, who has been devoted to him all my life.”

“I am sorry that you should think me impertinent, Miss Vanstead. All that I wish to do is to safeguard your father. Will you co-operate with me in this matter, or no?”

“You leave me no choice.”

“Oh yes, I do. I am exerting no compulsion. The choice is yours alone. If you wish, I will withdraw any suggestion of safeguard.” There was something in Macdonald’s voice which made Judith’s face flush, and it also made her opposition crumble.

"You despise me, don't you?" she said wearily. "Very well. Do as you wish."

"Thank you. I haven't made this suggestion without forethought or consultation. I have spoken to Dr. Rasen on the telephone and suggested that he should get a night nurse again. He told me that you always go to your father's room once or twice during every night to see if he needs anything——"

"I have done that for the past two years, night nurse or no night nurse. There is nothing I would not do for him. And now there is nothing I can do for him. Don't judge me too hardly if I opposed what you think to be wise. There is such a thing as feeling 'loss of care,' you know."

"I do know, but it won't be for very long, Miss Vanstead. Then there's another point I must ask you to consider. Your father said to me: 'My male issue has been eradicated. What are you doing to ensure that the same thing does not happen to Judith?' I said that I hoped you would understand the cogency of that enquiry for yourself, but it's my business to warn you."

She looked at him in speechless bewilderment for a second or two, her fine eyebrows arched, lips parted, and a frowning line between her eyes. Then she burst out: "The whole thing is so utterly lunatic. You come here, you undercut the very basis of our lives, the sense of mutual trust and security which is shared by decent people. I have lived at Templedean all my life, liking and respecting our neighbours, our servants, our own people. No one has ever had a more peaceful, unsensational life than I have, and now you ask me to believe this melodramatic theory of wholesale murder, in which nobody's life is safe."

"When there is an unconvicted murderer at liberty, nobody's life *is* safe," said Macdonald. "You spoke of mutual trust and security. That security and trust were smashed when your brother's car crashed on Templedean Hill, or so I believe. And because I believe it, I have got to act on the assumption that murder has been done."

"But you have no proof."

"Do you expect me to wait for a third demonstration, Miss Vanstead?" asked Macdonald, and his voice was terse. "It is my business to prevent that possibility, as far as it is in my power. I have warned you, and I must remind you that a poisoner is not easy to checkmate." He paused, and then asked abruptly: "Do you sleep well?"

"No, not very well."

"So I assumed, after I heard that you habitually went to see your father during the course of the night. Yet that day, when you came back from the picnic, you slept heavily for hours on end, and went to sleep again between seven o'clock and nine o'clock."

Judith stared at him in silence. At length she said: "You mean—it wasn't natural sleep?"

"You are the best judge of that. Isn't it true to say that if you had not been asleep you would have gone to see how Alan was? And if you had seen him, you would have realised that he was very ill?"

"Yes. I see what you mean. . . ." Her words came slowly, but Macdonald realised that he had made Judith Vanstead face reality at last. She saw the full implication of what he was saying. He went on:

"If you had been awake, in normal possession of your faculties, and had sent for a doctor, the child's life could have been saved. As it was, the doctor did not arrive until nearly nine hours after the boy was poisoned. It seems reasonable to me to suppose that the murderer took steps to see that if an antidote were to be given, it was to be given too late to be effective."

"Then that was why I felt so deadly, why I couldn't think or do anything sensible, why I didn't insist on looking after Alan myself. . . ."

“Yes. It’s possible that you had already been drugged.”

“But——” Again Judith stared at Macdonald. “That means I was drugged during the picnic.”

“It seems probable,” rejoined Macdonald evenly. “Now bearing that in mind, it’s your responsibility to see that the same thing doesn’t happen again. It is my responsibility to find out how it happened in the first place.”

She made a movement of impatience. “You make these suggestions and you make them sound so reasonable, but to me, it is all too fantastic. . . . There was Alan, with these poisonous fruits in his pocket. You argue that somebody gave him those berries, deliberately, to poison him——”

“Not of necessity,” said Macdonald. “I say again, until we have the results of the postmortem, there is no proof that the berries killed him. He may have been killed by some other similar agent. If that is so, the analysts will discover it. However much you may resent the precautions I impose, I ask you to think out the whole thing afresh, in the light of the suggestions I have made. I am not trying to lead you, I am asking you to think for yourself.”

“Very well. But how can I face . . . anybody . . . with this monstrous suspicion in my mind?”

She got up, restlessly, and Macdonald rose too.

“One thing this house offers you, Miss Vanstead, the chance of privacy. Why not take it? Believe me, there is nothing you can do.”

She laughed, shakily. “Like the doctor, you are advising me to go to bed and keep quiet. Perhaps it’s a good idea. At least I shan’t have to pretend. . . .”

2

When Macdonald left Judith Vanstead he walked across the park towards the Home Farm, pondering deeply. Every case started in the same way, he reflected: the crucial events were set out, the scaffolding of essential facts without which no progress could be made. Then came the business of studying the human beings involved. Macdonald’s examination of witnesses was not solely concerned with the evidence they could give him, nor even with the probabilities and possibilities which he postulated to fill the inevitable gaps in voluntary statements. While one part of his mind was busy registering the facts testified, and comparing statements with what he knew to be true, another part of it was intent on judging the quality of the witnesses themselves. MacDONald knew all about the fallibility of human testimony: the fact that honest, single-minded witnesses could give wholly erroneous evidence because their powers of observation and memory were at fault, but he also knew that nearly every witness, while concentrating on answering questions, divulges something about himself in the process. Macdonald often thought that in all his cases he started with a set of labels, as it were, the names of those who were concerned in the events he was investigating. Then, the labels came to life. They demonstrated their own qualities of accuracy, or the lack of it; of patience or impatience, of kindness or harshness, of quick reaction or slow obtuseness, of verbosity or reticence, and the label was superseded in the detective’s mind by an awareness of yet another human being.

Macdonald found Elizabeth Barton in the garden in front of the farmhouse. The word “garden” was not yet really applicable to the tangled plot of land on which Elizabeth was

working. Coarse grass, docks and nettles choked the ground around a few depressed rosebushes, but it was evident that a garden would emerge in course of time. Elizabeth was digging, and she was a vigorous and competent digger. She examined every spit she turned and tore from it the loathsome yellow roots of long-established nettles, the thick stocks of dandelion and sow thistle, the never ending complex of bindweed roots and ground elder, and hurled them into a big wheelbarrow with accurate and furious aim. As Macdonald paused at the gate, she turned to him with an expression by no means welcoming.

“Do you want my husband? I think he’s in the cow house.”

“I’m afraid I want you,” rejoined Macdonald apologetically. He respected gardeners, and he knew just how unwelcome his intrusion would be.

“Mrs. Barton?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Macdonald. Could I speak to you for a few minutes? I am a C.I.D. man. I do apologise for interrupting your job. It’s a tough job.”

She laughed, her flushed face suddenly merry. “That’s an understatement. I do think convolvulus is the most maddening weed in existence. I believe its roots go on for ever. I’m very dirty. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I do not. It’s the sort of dirt I respect. Could we sit on the porch?”

“If you don’t mind. It’ll save me changing my shoes.” She grounded her spade, rubbed her hands on her hessian apron, untied the latter and hung it on her spade and led the way to the roomy porch and sat down on one of its wide benches. “I suppose it’s about Alan?”

“Yes, I’m afraid it is. I want to ask you about that picnic.”

“I don’t really like picnics,” said Elizabeth reflectively, “and the more elaborate they are, the less I like them. This was quite an elaborate affair. Miss Vanstead and Mr. Standish set out first, and they took the most superb outfit of picnic baskets and thermos flasks and all the rest. They laid a cloth on the grass, and set out deck chairs and rugs and cushions, and then unpacked the baskets. It was the most terrific spread. There were boxes and boxes of sandwiches, chicken and game and cream cheese and salad and goodness knows what. There were meringues and éclairs and jellies and ices, enough for a banquet. And there was iced coffee and wine and ginger pop and iced lemonade. Caroline gave one look at it all and said ‘Lummy,’ and I felt like saying the same. The only person who looked discontented was poor Alan. He said, ‘It’d taste much nicer indoors without the beastly wasps and things,’ and really, he was quite right.”

“How did he seem—quite well?” asked Macdonald.

“He must have felt all right, because he ate such a lot. He was a sickly looking child, and I thought at once that Miss Vanstead was just being silly, letting him cram all that rich food. When I heard he’d been sick it seemed to me inevitable that he must have been sick, because he simply gorged, snatched everything he wanted and just crammed it down.”

“How did you all sit?”

“In a circle, more or less. Miss Vanstead and Miss Hobart had deck chairs. Alan and Caroline sat on either side of Miss Vanstead, on the ground. Alan was on her right, Caroline on her left. I sat next to Caroline, and Miss Hobart was opposite Miss Vanstead. Mr. Standish was between Alan and Miss Hobart more or less opposite to me.”

“And did everybody help themselves?”

“Yes, I suppose we did. All the sandwiches were labelled, and the children started by sampling the lot. Alan and Caroline drank ginger pop. Miss Vanstead and Miss Hobart had a

bottle of hock, Mr. Standish drank lager beer, and I drank iced water. Have you ever been to a picnic like that?"

"No, I'm quite sure I haven't," rejoined Macdonald. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Not really. I don't pretend not to enjoy delicious food, but it all seemed a bit overdone. The idea was that Alan was to enjoy himself. It was *his* party, and we were all trying to keep him in a good temper and I think he hated the lot of us. When we'd finished eating and Caroline said, 'Let's go nutting,' I did think of going with them, but I thought the two children might get on better by themselves. You see, Alan hadn't had anybody of his own age to play with while he was at Templedean, and he'd been made such a fuss of by his aunt, it seemed a good idea to let him go off on the rampage with Caroline, who's a very sensible, normal, wholesome child."

"So you didn't see anything of the two children while they were in the wood?"

"I saw Caroline once, when she climbed a tree at the edge of the wood. I was blackberrying in the hedge a short distance away. I should have heard if they'd called out to me, but they didn't. When I rejoined the party and heard Alan had been ill, I offered to go back in the car with him, but Miss Vanstead said no. I shall always be sorry I didn't insist on going. You see, I'm a trained nurse, and if I'd seen the boy I should have realised if he'd been ill. Miss Vanstead doesn't really know anything about children." She paused, and then added apologetically: "I know it's not my business to ask questions, but is it an accepted fact that Alan was poisoned by eating nightshade berries he found in the wood?"

"The medical men accept that explanation. Doesn't it satisfy you?"

"No, I'm afraid it doesn't, but the whole thing is so confusing."

"Would you tell me why the explanation doesn't satisfy you?"

"Well, just common sense and knowledge of children. Alan ate too much at the picnic. He was obviously a livery, bilious child. When he was in the wood with Caroline he was fretful and bad tempered, and she was bored with him and climbed trees to amuse herself, leaving Alan sitting on the ground. He was sick. Well, if he'd been eating berries, presumably the berries came up as fast as they went down. But if he was sick before he found the berries, I'm certain he wouldn't have eaten them after he was sick. No child starts eating anything immediately after he's been sick. So the poisoning business seems a bit odd to me. When *did* he eat those berries?—because if they made him sick, presumably he got rid of them. There was no time for them to get digested."

Macdonald nodded. "Yes. I agree with you that that is the problem. Yet we have the evidence of both Mr. Standish and Miss Vanstead that by the time they got him home the boy was in a state which indicated a drugged sleep. When Standish put him to bed, Alan was almost torpid."

Elizabeth did not answer; she took a cigarette from a packet on the bench and then offered one to Macdonald. After a moment the latter said:

"Well, what's your answer, from the point of view of a nurse with common sense?"

"I just don't know, Mr. Macdonald. My guess is that he had the berries in his pocket and ate them before the picnic. He then ate too much rich food and vomited it in the wood, but in the meantime the poison from the nightshade berries had got into his system and being sick didn't eliminate it. But if that's the explanation, when did he pick the berries?"

The sound of the gate opening caused Elizabeth to look round quickly. "It's my husband," she said, and there was relief in her voice. "The awful thing about all this mystery and trouble

is that one always seems to be expecting something else to happen. Gilbert”—she called to her husband—“this is Mr. Macdonald. He’s been asking me about Alan.”

4

“I just don’t know. The whole thing is completely beyond me,” said Gilbert Barton unhappily. He had joined them on the porch, and he looked at Macdonald with troubled eyes.

“Murder’s right outside my experience, and I’d much rather believe that accident accounted for everything. The minute you start on the other tack, you begin suspecting somebody, knowing quite well that they suspect you in turn.”

“Well, let’s examine the accident theory,” said Macdonald. “Gerald Vanstead made a mess of his own brakes. You pass that?”

“Oh lord, yes. You must know much better than I do that too many double gins make a chap overoptimistic. If Vanstead adjusted his brakes after he’d been drinking, it’s perfectly reasonable to suppose he made a muck of it.”

“Very well,” replied Macdonald equably. “Alan poisoned himself by eating nightshade berries he’d picked at a time and place unknown. You pass that?”

“I see nothing improbable in it. The berries are known to grow in the locality. There may be some of them much nearer to Templedean than is known. Alan was the sort of kid who’d eat anything, and he hadn’t the sense of a hen.”

“Very well. The woodland where the children played burst into fire on its own account, in the middle of the night. Do you pass that?”

Barton hesitated, and Elizabeth put in:

“Poor old Gilbert. That’s the thing he can’t swallow. That fire doesn’t make sense to him.”

“Why not?” asked Macdonald.

Gilbert Barton sat with his elbows on his knees, his chin on his fists, staring down at the flagged floor and his own muddy boots.

“I expect I’m being fussy,” he said unhappily, “but I just can’t see how that fire happened. I was in Bury Wood myself that afternoon. I knew where the picnic party was to be, and I took my gun and strolled through the roughs, thinking I might get a brace of bunnies for the pot and walk home with Liza. I reckoned she’d have had enough high-life picnic by three o’clock,” he added with a grin. “I walked along the ride where the kids had been playing. Of course the party had gone home by that time. There are nuts there all right—or were. It’s mixed coppice, with plenty of hazel and young ash, and a few decent beeches and wild cherry. There are some larches, but they’re all young trees. Admitting we’ve had a dry summer, I still don’t think that wood was inflammable enough to burn by itself, unless someone started a fire. You can argue that young Alan might have played about with matches—he was a young devil that way—but if he had, there should have been some smoke by the time I was in the wood, and the undergrowth *must* have been smoking by the time Standish went after his badgers. If he hadn’t noticed it, the badgers would have. But according to him the beasts were playing around outside their set completely unconcerned.”

“So the fire couldn’t have started until after he got his photographs,” put in Macdonald.

“That’s about it,” replied Barton. “Have you seen his photographs?”

“No. Not yet. Have you?”

“No. I should like to, though.”

“Why?”

Barton still stared at his boots. "Is there any possible way of proving those photographs of his were taken that night?"

"I doubt it, unless *you* can provide any evidence on that point," said Macdonald. "If a photograph is taken in daylight, you may get some indication of the hour it was taken, the direction of the light and so forth, but a flashlight photograph is a different matter. Mr. Standish says the film he exposed is still undeveloped. I've got the spool here, but I don't expect to learn much from it."

"For all you can tell, the film might have been exposed the previous night, or any old time," put in Elizabeth.

Barton uttered a sound of protest, and Macdonald put in: "Is that how you feel about it?"

"Oh, it's just one of the loathsome possibilities," she replied. "If you're right in suspecting that Gerald and Alan were both murdered, I'm as ready to believe that Standish was in on it as anyone else. After all, he was at the picnic, he did put Alan to bed, and he did go back to Bury Wood that night."

"I don't think you're being fair," said Barton indignantly. "Standish isn't a bad chap."

"He's an intellectual. He doesn't like children, and he most particularly didn't like Alan," retorted Elizabeth. "Yet he put him to bed. That's the most unnatural part of the story. You can't swallow that fire, Gilbert. I can't swallow Standish offering to play nursemaid to a sick child. It's all out of character." She broke off and turned to Macdonald. "Am I behaving disgustingly? If so, I'll stop. You came here and asked questions—quite proper, objective questions—and now I've gone off at a tangent, trying to throw unworthy suspicions on a man I happen to dislike. You look a fair person. Stop me if I'm being unfair."

"I don't think you are being unfair," answered Macdonald. "Either this child's death was accidental or it wasn't. If it wasn't, it's your business to help in every possible way to get at the facts. You've made quite a good point, psychologically, in saying that Standish's behaviour seemed out of character. But in order to be quite fair, let's ask your husband what he thinks about that point." He turned to Barton. "Do you think it seemed in character for Standish to put Alan to bed?"

Barton did not answer, but Macdonald persisted: "You can surely give an opinion one way or the other. You say Standish isn't a bad chap. Do you think he's more kindly by nature than your wife does?"

"I don't think he murdered that kid," said Barton stubbornly. "If I answer your question honestly, I only reinforce what Elizabeth's been suggesting. You see the only reason Standish would have bothered with Alan was in order to please Judith Vanstead."

"I see," said Macdonald. "And the inference you can draw from that is this: If Standish orders his behaviour by a desire to please Miss Vanstead, it might have seemed profitable to him to have Alan out of the way."

"And it's a damned unfair inference," said Barton indignantly. "It may be true that Standish is devoted to Miss Vanstead. Liza says it's obvious——"

"I didn't quite say that, Gilbert," put in Elizabeth. "I said it was obvious that he took pains to show his devotion."

"Well, I see no reason to suspect his devotion is other than honest," persisted Barton. "After all, she's been very decent to him, and everybody admires and respects her. Damn all, Liza, remember how generous she was to us, spending the earth on this house to make it comfortable and as you wanted it. I've no doubt she's been generous to Standish, too, and he has tried to show his gratitude by helping her when he can. As a general rule there's not much

anybody can do to help Miss Vanstead, but when Alan came I think she needed help. That day, after the picnic, when she was whacked to the world, Standish did the most obvious thing in the world to help Miss Vanstead. He knew the servants loathed the kid, and that she wouldn't leave him to the servants, so Standish said, 'I'll put him to bed for you,' and the result of that decent impulse is that everybody says he had quite another motive for doing it."

"And that is your own honest opinion of the incident?" asked Macdonald.

"Yes, it is."

"Gilbert, I don't want to be mean," put in Liza, "but I know you're not generally an analytical person. No farmer is. Hard work in the open air doesn't tend to make a man analytical. But you've thought out this incident quite carefully. Have you thought it out all by yourself, or did Standish interpret his own behaviour for you when he came and talked to you in the twenty acre yesterday evening? Are you being original, or are you just quoting?"

Gilbert Barton laughed. "All right, Liza. Perhaps I *was* quoting, but wasn't it a reasonable 'quote'?"

"Yes. Standish always *is* reasonable, but I dislike him because he's insidious. It was he who told you that the Vansteads were all at loggerheads with Gerald. It was he who told you that you'd be kicked out of this farm if Gerald inherited. It was he who suggested that Gerald might have got so depressed that he wrecked his own car deliberately. You wouldn't have thought of any of those things yourself."

Gilbert Barton stretched his limbs wearily. "All right, my lass. I see your point, but I still hold to my own. Standish did *not* poison that kid. And that I swear. Would anybody like some cider? because I should." And with that he got up and went indoors.

Chapter 12

1

It was sunset when Macdonald left the farmhouse and walked across the parkland towards the chauffeur's quarters and the garages, his intention being more to form his own idea of Beach as an individual than in the hope of getting any information from the man. Inspector Young had described Beach clearly enough, a dour reticent fellow who gave no opening to any who questioned him. Moving quietly over the pasture in the evening fragrance, while tenuous drifts of mists showed faintly white in the hollows, Macdonald pondered over the fact that the most difficult defence to break down was that of the witness who would commit himself to neither statement, opinion or explanation. The infamous Landru had proved that point. "You accuse me of these murders. Prove it. I have nothing to say," and for three years the police of France had toiled to defeat Landru's challenge, always met by the same rejoinder when they questioned him: "I have nothing to say."

As he crossed the old stable square and saw the cottages beyond, Macdonald agreed with Inspector Young. Beach was indeed comfortably placed here, but would a man plan to commit murder to safeguard his own comfort, to ensure the continuation of living conditions and the easy, familiar work which he enjoyed? And Macdonald had to admit that there was no answer to that question. The annals of crime showed that it was not only hate and jealousy and greed and fear which had been motives for murder. It had been caused in some cases by very different impulses—even the impulse to defend a man's reputation as a respected member of society. Murder was a crime on which it was unsafe to dogmatise.

As he approached the chauffeur's cottage, Macdonald saw that the doors of one of the garages were open, and he heard a quiet voice speaking, though he could not overhear the words spoken. Then the figure of the uniformed chauffeur stepped out from behind the doors and the man stared across at Macdonald's approaching figure. The next words he spoke were audible enough.

"Very good, sir. I'll have the Daimler round at nine-thirty. It's not much more than an hour's run."

"Right. The train's due at eleven, so that gives plenty of time. Saunders will have the cases ready. Good evening to you, Beach."

It was Walter Vanstead who spoke this time. The older man walked off in the direction of the house without a glance in Macdonald's direction, leaving Macdonald wondering if Walter Vanstead habitually came and gave the chauffeur his orders in person, when there was a telephone connecting the house and the garages.

Beach stood still and waited for Macdonald to approach. In his chauffeur's livery, Beach was a trim, well-groomed fellow, square and sturdy, upright, with a capacity for standing still and looking very directly at any who approached. He waited for Macdonald to speak.

"James Beach? My name is Macdonald, Chief Inspector, C.I.D. Can I have a word with you? Indoors would be better, I think."

Beach took his time, considering the man in front of him, as though debating with himself as to whether to ask the newcomer indoors or not. Then, still without speaking, he closed the big double doors of the garage—they were still the old stable doors, Macdonald noted, heavy

and well swung, held in place when open by bolts run down into the concrete floor. Beach led the way to his own door, entered the house first, and went into a small room which held a table with a telephone on it, two chairs, and some shelves with a few books on them—evidently the chauffeur’s office, where he kept account books and papers, maps and guidebooks. It was all very neat and clean and quite impersonal.

“You know what I’m here for, Beach?”

“You’ve said you’re a Yard man, so I suppose it’s Yard business,” was the curt reply.

“Quite right. I am here to investigate the deaths of Mr. Gerald Vanstead and his son, so I have the right to expect assistance from all responsible persons.”

“Then I might as well tell you straight, it’s no use asking for assistance from me. I’ve told all I know, which was damn little anyway.”

Macdonald, trying to assess the workings of the mind which lay behind that expressionless, stolid face, did not regard the answer as aggressive; in his own terse idiom Beach was saying, as Landru had said even more briefly, “I have nothing to say.”

“I’ve read your evidence,” went on Macdonald. “You stated that in your opinion Mr. Vanstead was a bad driver. Did you base your opinion on recent observation or past experience?”

“Both.” Beach pulled out one of the chairs, indicated the other one to Macdonald, and sat down. “I taught him to drive. I told Sir Charles then that Mr. Gerald would never be a decent driver——”

“Why?” asked Macdonald.

“Drive yourself?”

“Yes. I’ve driven for twenty-five years and never been in trouble.”

“Then you know what I mean by a chap being a bad driver. Boil it down and it means he always acts as if he was the only bloke on the road, and hasn’t the judgment to know how much space he takes up. Mr. Gerald Vanstead couldn’t learn. That was his trouble.”

“You knew that he cruised down Templedean Hill out of gear?”

“Yes, same as I said just now. Never thought of anything else being on the road. If that road was clear it was O.K. The rise slowed him up. If it wasn’t clear, well, he had it.”

Macdonald sat back in his chair and studied the other man. “Yes. He had it. How long have you been employed here, Beach?”

“Since 1920.”

“That’s a long time. Sir Charles must have trusted you, and you must have trusted him in return. Reliable service and an appreciative employer bring about mutual trust.”

“I’m not denying it.”

“How came it then, that you, a trusted employee, did not warn Sir Charles that his only remaining son was driving in such a way as to endanger his own life and other people’s?”

The question was obviously unexpected. Beach stared back warily and made no answer.

“Well, Beach? That question will be asked in court some time, or I’m very much mistaken. I’m not here for my own amusement.”

Still the man made no reply, and Macdonald went on: “It wasn’t to your interest to report that his driving was dangerous. Is that it?”

“It wasn’t my business to watch Mr. Gerald.”

“It’s the business of any responsible person to report dangerous driving. If you claim that Sir Charles was a very sick man and you didn’t want to worry him, I will admit your point, though I think you were mistaken. His mind was not sick, and never has been. He trusted you,

as an old and valued servant. Yet you said nothing. You could have told Miss Vanstead, or her uncle, what you knew. You could have told Sergeant Brown. He's a very decent fellow, as you must know. But you preferred to say nothing. Why?"

"Not my business."

"You were seen in the village the evening before Mr. Vanstead's death. You passed that steam roller. Do you deny it?"

"No."

"You knew Mr. Vanstead would take his car out that Thursday afternoon. Did you warn him that the steam roller was at work and road repairs in progress?"

"No."

"You said just now, 'If the road was clear it was all right, the rise slowed him up. If not, he had it.' You knew the road would not be clear. You knew, better than anyone else, the gradient of that hill. Even though his brakes had been in order, an accident was probable. If his brakes failed, a bad smash was certain. Can you deny any of those facts?"

"It was no business of mine to think things out for other people. I don't offer advice where it's not wanted."

"So your conscience is quite happy about it?"

"My conscience is my own business. I've enough conscience not to drink. Mr. Vanstead reeked of gin every time he passed you, and his own folks knew it. It was their business to give him advice, not mine. I'd said my say twenty-five years ago, that Mr. Gerald Vanstead wasn't fit to take a car on the road. They knew what I thought, and so did he."

2

"During the time that Mr. Vanstead owned that car, did you ever do anything to it at all?" asked Macdonald, after a pause in which the two men sat and regarded each other in silence.

"No. I never touched it and I never spoke about it. Mr. Vanstead didn't speak one word to me all the time he was living here—not one word."

"Can you remember the day he first brought the car to the garage here?"

"Yes. Miss Judith came over here in the morning and said her brother was buying a car, and I was to have number three garage ready to take it that evening. I opened the garage, left the key in the lock, and swept the place out. I heard him come in. Next day I got Hobson up to mend the gatepost. Mr. Gerald buckled his wing on it the first time he drove it in."

"Do you really mean that Mr. Vanstead did not address a single word to you all the time he was here?"

"I said it and I meant it," replied Beach. "The first time I took him out in the Daimler—with Miss Judith that was—I said, 'Good day, sir.' He didn't answer; didn't so much as turn his head. I didn't say it again. I knew he hated me—I told the Inspector so the first time he saw me, I gave Mr. Gerald a dressing down twenty-five years ago and he never forgot it."

"You say he was a bad driver, Beach, and I have no doubt you've got good reasons for saying so, but he drove in Malaya and Australia without accident so far as we can learn. He also serviced his own car in Malaya, because he lived miles away from any garage or service station. He must have known a bit about engines. Did you actually see him working on those brake drums?"

"I saw him messing about, but I didn't bother to see what he was doing. I kept out of his way."

“If you had been adjusting brake drums on a car, what would you do to test them?”

“The same as you, I expect: get the car going on the level and stop her dead. Then I’d take her out on a gradient and see if the brakes held.”

“So far as you know, did Mr. Vanstead test his brakes when he got the car out of the garage?”

“No. He drove straight out and turned right, down the hill.”

“He had his wife and child with him in that car, Beach. You knew the steam roller was working at the bottom of the hill. You knew the way he drove. You knew he had been working on his brake drums the previous day. Don’t tell me that an experienced chauffeur like yourself can’t see at a glance what somebody is tackling on a car. That won’t wash.”

Beach sat perfectly still, his face stolid, but there were tiny beads of perspiration on his forehead. Macdonald let the pause prolong itself deliberately. He had got more out of the man than he had expected, not in the way of fresh evidence, but in the assessment of human probabilities.

3

“Let us get on to the day of the picnic, when young Alan was playing in Bury Wood,” went on Macdonald evenly. Beach gave a slight jump. He had been concentrating on that day when Gerald Vanstead set out for his last drive down Templedean Hill, and Macdonald guessed that the chauffeur had been expecting another direct question and was holding himself in readiness to parry it.

“Miss Vanstead and Mr. Standish set out in the Morris car about half-past eleven,” went on Macdonald. “You took the Morris round to the front door. What time was that?”

Beach frowned, obviously trying to judge where this question would lead. “About ten minutes before the half-hour.”

“And you helped Saunders to load up the picnic baskets and other gear?”

Neither Beach, nor anyone else, could have told that Macdonald was feeling his way along. He did not know, either from Young’s report or any other evidence, that Beach had brought the Morris to the front door, or that he had helped Saunders to pack in the baskets; he assumed it as the most likely procedure, dictated by common sense. No chauffeur would let a butler load gear into a car without teaching him the proper way to stow it—and Standish was not the type of man to help servants with their job.

Beach nodded, and Macdonald went on: “Miss Vanstead and Mr. Standish drove off at half-past eleven. What time did you take the Daimler round to pick up Mr. Walter Vanstead?”

“Twelve o’clock.”

“What did you do in the interval?”

“Came back home and read the paper.”

“You drove Mr. Walter Vanstead to the gate of the long drive in Bury Wood. Which route did you follow?”

“I drove through the village, across the Inchcombe road and up the hill by the wood.”

“Did you pull up anywhere?”

“Mr. Vanstead told me to stop at Hind’s, the newspaper shop. He didn’t get out. Hind came and spoke to him.”

“You then drove straight to the wood. Did you get out of the car when Mr. Vanstead did?”

“I got out and opened the door. He went on into the wood and strolled about a bit. Later he called to me to come and help look for his shooting stick.”

“Did you see either of the two children?”

“I didn’t. Mr. Vanstead caught sight of Master Alan. He asked me if I knew what the child was doing there, and I told him about the picnic, so he said he’d rather go home and we walked straight back to the car.”

“How far away was the Daimler from the place the children were playing?”

“About half a mile.”

“Did you see the other car, the Morris?”

“No. They’d taken it along another track, off the road.”

“And what time did you get back home?”

“Time for lunch, 1:30.”

“Let’s get the timetable right,” said Macdonald evenly. “How long does it take you to drive to the village?”

“Seven minutes.”

“You stopped at the paper shop. Call it ten minutes in all. 12:10. You then drove up Bury Hill to the long drive. How long did that take?”

“About ten minutes. Maybe twelve.”

“It was about 12:22 when you got there. How long did the drive home take you?”

“About fifteen minutes.”

“So you probably started home about quarter past one. You were in the wood for nearly an hour—fifty-three minutes.”

Beach made no comment, and Macdonald went on: “Where were you when Miss Vanstead arrived home with her nephew?”

“In the yard there.”

“Who brought the Morris round to the garage?”

“I did. I heard it come in and went and fetched it.”

“What about the picnic baskets?”

“I called Saunders and told him to fetch them. Then I took the car round and cleaned it before I put it away, same as I always do.”

“And what did you do for the rest of the afternoon?”

“Dug my garden.”

“Thanks. That’s about all,” said Macdonald, “unless you have anything to say, Beach.”

“I’ve nothing to say,” rejoined the chauffeur dourly.

4

“Seen your way through the wood, Chief?”

Young looked anxiously at Macdonald when the latter came to see him that evening. The Yard man shook his head.

“This wood’s like a maze, Young. There are too many ways, and most of them lead back to where you started. In other words, you can make out a case against a number of people, complete with motive, means, and opportunity, but it’s no easier to pin it on one than on another.”

“You saw Standish?”

“Yes. Standish is badly rattled. I’m quite sure that he’s an intelligent fellow—he wouldn’t have been retained as Sir Charles Vanstead’s secretary if he weren’t—but he’s so determined to be cautious that he gives the impression of being a fool. If the Attorney General set out the case against Standish I doubt very much if Defending Counsel could persuade a jury that the man isn’t guilty, for all that there isn’t an item of direct evidence. Standish *must* have known that that boy was ill, yet he put him to bed, left him, and ensured that he was left. Also, I think it’s overwhelmingly probable that Standish fired that wood. I think he went back to do it after he had heard the boy was dead. Walter Vanstead told Standish about Alan’s death, and showed him the nightshade berries.”

“Why are you so strongly of the opinion that Standish fired the wood? Why not Vanstead?”

“Because Standish is a good naturalist. He *knew* that *Atropa belladonna* did not grow in that wood. For all his determination to avoid claiming any expert knowledge, Standish has a scientific mind. He has written some very competent articles on the flora and fauna of these parts—my chaps dug that up for me in town. It wouldn’t occur to a man like Standish that the police would be incompetent. He knows quite well we’re not incompetent. Very well. The boy dies from eating berries of *Atropa belladonna* in Bury Wood, and Standish knows that it doesn’t grow there. He has the precise mind of the naturalist. Walter Vanstead hasn’t. To him a weed is a weed. Not an exact species. Weeds grow in woods—that’s good enough for him.”

“And you reckon Standish poisoned young Alan to prevent us asking the kid questions?”

“Maybe; but if Barton and his wife are to be believed, there’s a further motive. They think that Standish was making the running with Miss Vanstead. If that’s true, it was to his advantage that Alan, the heir, should die young.”

Young gave a prolonged whistle. “So that’s the way the wind blows? But even with Alan out of the way, there’s still Walter Vanstead’s son.”

“Yes. He’s in the R.A.F. A test pilot on these supersonic jets. Standish may have a cynical belief in the old adage that Providence helps those who help themselves. I don’t know, Young. I can’t even give you a straight opinion, because I haven’t formed one. The man I saw wasn’t the real man. I told you I was certain he was rattled. He tried to conceal the fact with a mask of academic distaste. Not interested in detection. That just wasn’t true. If it had been he wouldn’t have found it necessary to be so artificial. Then there’s Beach. I was interested in Beach.”

“Get anything out of him?”

“Nothing new in the way of direct evidence. He’s got more sense than Standish in some ways. He didn’t refuse to talk. In fact, he answered more willingly than I had expected on the whole, but it wasn’t what he said that interested me. It was his omissions. He’s a Chapel goer, isn’t he? That is, he would avoid a lie direct if possible. That’s good policy as well as sound ethics. I went for him in this way: that he knew Gerald Vanstead was a dangerous driver; he knew that Vanstead risked a smash every time he cruised down that hill. Why didn’t Beach report it? He’s been with the family for over twenty-five years; he was trusted and he’d have been listened to. He replied, ‘It wasn’t my business,’ and he repeated it several times. If I’m any judge, that reply was an evasion.”

“I don’t get you, Chief.”

“Well, think it out this way. Beach was an old and trusted servant. A man doesn’t serve the same family all those years without developing some licence in expressing his opinions. It’s not all ‘Very good, sir’ and cap-touching. Now when Gerald Vanstead came back and ignored

Beach to such an extent that the former wouldn't even give a civil good day to the man, Beach had a legitimate grievance. If an old servant has a grievance he grumbles, to somebody. When Beach saw that Vanstead was driving as badly as a man could drive, it wasn't human nature not to pass it on. The most likely member of the family to give a sympathetic ear to Beach's reports of Gerald's driving was Walter, because Walter loathed Gerald as much as Beach did."

Young nodded. "Yes. I get you. I think that's a shrewd summing up."

"So when I said that Beach's answer was an evasion, I meant this: in saying 'It wasn't my business' Beach did not state that he had *not* reported Gerald's bad driving. He evaded an exact answer by the form of his reply. He would not admit that he *had* reported it, not for the world, but neither would he say outright 'I did not report it.' In my opinion he *did* report it, but I'm not certain whom he chose as confidant. My guess would be Walter Vanstead, and if I'm right, Beach knows more than he admits."

Young rumped up his hair, his face frowning in the effort of concentration. "Looks as though they all knew Gerald's little ways. Beach knew, and probably told Mr. Walter. Barton knew, and he told Standish. Did you see Barton, by the way?"

"Yes, he's a nice chap and a good farmer, but why the blazes didn't Barton go to Sergeant Brown and tell him Gerald was driving to the public danger? What was the use of telling Standish? His knowledge has come back on him boomerangwise. Barton's very nicely placed, settled for life, with a house which any farmer might envy. And that fact will be exploited if we ever have to bring a charge on circumstantial evidence alone."

"Damn it all, Chief, Barton would never have killed that kid."

"I'm willing to believe you; and you can believe me when I say that if we don't get any direct evidence, somebody will point out that Barton's wife was at that picnic. In fact everybody has got something to throw at everybody else. However, perhaps we shall get something definite from the p.m."

"Do you think those doctor chaps could have made a howler, and that the kid didn't die of atropine poisoning after all?" asked Young.

"I've no doubt they're right in stating that he died of atropine poisoning. What we want to know is when it was given to him—before the picnic, at the picnic, or after the picnic. Remember, Alan was left to wait for Miss Hobart and Caroline. He waited in the hall and on the terrace. Anything might have happened."

Young scratched his head. "I reckon we're properly up against it, Chief."

"Yes. It's all pretty vague at the moment. Suspicion and not much else. But something will happen, Young. Something nearly always does happen."

"Does it? This sort of thing's off my beat."

"They can't leave it alone," said Macdonald. "I've seen it again and again. Wondering gets them down. The processes of a criminal enquiry must seem so slow, and like impatient chess players they make a move before they've had time to think out the consequences."

"I suppose that's plain sense," said Young. "If they thought it out to begin with they'd never have started."

"And having started, they feel impelled to go on," said Macdonald.

Chapter 13

1

After Macdonald had left Templedean Place, Herbert Standish gave up any attempt to work and went out into the gardens, prowling about like a lost spirit. He had been uneasy enough in the presence of the Chief Inspector. The deliberate questioning and relentless summing up had shattered all that remained of Standish's habitual complacency. He had been accustomed to despise what he called "an unstable nervous system," but now his own body was clammy with chilly sweat, his hands unsteady, his mind no longer under the control of his will.

Standish was no weakling. Finding that he could no longer concentrate on reading or writing, he sought refuge in the mechanical work of typing an essay he had written. He was a good typist, quick, rhythmical and accurate, and he found that the effort of concentration required by typing at high speed did help to take his mind off the acute unease caused by Macdonald's pitiless analysis. Then Saunders, the butler, came in, and the message he brought set Standish and his nerves aquiver again.

"Miss Vanstead asked me to inform you that Sir Charles will not be expecting you to read to him this evening, sir."

"Good heavens! he never misses that half hour. Is he feeling worse, Saunders? Has the doctor been here?"

"The doctor is here, sir, but I understand the arrangement is due to the Chief Inspector. He asked that nobody should be allowed to see Sir Charles, barring the nurses and Mr. Stubbs."

Saunders's melancholy voice spoke unctuously. The butler had no opinion of Standish, regarding him as "no class," though it was necessary to treat him with the formal courtesy which, in Saunders's opinion, should be reserved for "the gentry."

Standish was both puzzled and perturbed by the butler's message. He would have liked to ask Saunders for further information, but Standish was awkward with the servants. His own upbringing had not brought him into contact with butlers, and when he first came to live at Templedean he had treated Saunders with a cold curtness which had really been a cloak to cover his own nervousness. "Never be familiar with servants" had been his motto, and the upper servants at Templedean had resented his manner.

After a pause, Saunders went on: "Have you any instructions about dinner, sir? Mr. Vanstead is dining out, and Miss Vanstead is having dinner in her own room."

It was this piece of information which upset Standish completely. That Judith should send him a message by the butler was discomfiting enough, but Standish had assumed that he would be able to discuss this highhanded behaviour of Macdonald's with her quite shortly. Saunders, still professionally bland, stood waiting for an answer, though there was a speculative gleam in his usually impassive eyes.

Standish, angry and perturbed, said abruptly: "Send me a tray in here."

"Very good, sir," rejoined the butler and turned to the door. This arrangement was what Saunders had been hoping for—it would save him trouble—but he did not think the better of Standish on that account. Saunders took a very poor view of any man who chose to dine off a tray. When the butler had closed the door behind him, Standish went outside into the garden,

incapable of sitting still any longer. Apart from major perturbations, he was angry with himself for having given in to the butler. Standish was quite acute enough to know that he would have been wiser to dine in solitary state in the dining room, and thus keep up an appearance of normality. He knew quite well that he had faked it; he could not face the thought of a meal served by Saunders with the slow punctilio in which the butler delighted. His nerves all on the raw, Standish imagined the servants debating that point put so brutally by Macdonald: "You put the child to bed. You ensured that he should be left alone . . ." It was not a comforting reflection.

Standish prowled round the rose garden; he walked round and round the lily pool. He wandered through the shrubbery without particularly noticing where he was going, and followed the flagged path under the pergola which led towards the garages in the old stable yard. It was here that he met Walter Vanstead, who was walking away from the garages after Macdonald's arrival there. And Walter Vanstead walked past Standish as though the latter did not exist.

It was this event which caused Standish his most acute discomfort. His face flushed in furious resentment, but the heat of anger faded quickly, leaving a cold sweat behind it. With rage and fear in his heart, Standish strode off across the park, seeking to regain his equilibrium by hard exercise. He forgot all about his dinner, and thus it was that when the despised "tray" was brought to his room by Annie, the housemaid, Standish was nowhere to be seen. Annie was a conscientious girl; she did not like to think of Mr. Standish having to eat a cold dinner, so she went back to Saunders to report.

"He's not in his sitting room, Mr. Saunders. Shall I go upstairs to his bedroom?"

"If it's Mr. Standish you're talking about, he's not upstairs. I've just turned his bed down," said Emily, the bedroom maid.

Hobson, the bootboy, joined in. "I saw him crossing the park when I come in. Going a fair lick he was too."

Saunders considered these statements. "You can bring the soup and the bird back to keep hot, Annie," he ordered. "Mr. Standish will doubtless ring his bell when he returns."

Saunders went to join Mrs. Newby, the housekeeper, in her parlour, where dinner was served for the upper servants. When they were alone together, Saunders leaned forward confidentially towards Mrs. Newby.

"If you ask me, Standish has done a bolt," said the butler.

Mrs. Newby looked horrified. "You don't say so!" she exclaimed. "Really, Mr. Saunders, I can't believe that."

"You didn't see his face," said the butler. "The Chief Inspector was in there talking to him for no end of a time. Then this Mr. Macdonald goes up to see Sir Charles. After that orders were given that Standish was not to be allowed to see the master. When I went in to ask him about serving dinner, Standish looked green—never saw a man more upset. All of a dither he was. 'I'll have a tray in here,' he says—but he's nowhere about in the house. Hobson saw him tearing off across the park. You mark my words, he's gone while the going was good."

"I *can't* believe it!" protested Mrs. Newby. "Deary, deary me. . . . All this worry and trouble."

"And if it's true that somebody was at the root of the trouble, I'll say it's Standish as likely as not," said Saunders. "I never did trust him, with his clever ways and his science and that. If it's poison they're suspecting, I know where they're most likely to find poisons in *this* house, Mrs. Newby."

Herbert Standish felt better when he was in the open air, walking fast on that fair September evening. He had always found that walking helped to restore his nerves or temper when he was upset, and he was, also, a man who took keen pleasure in observing the wildlife of woodland and field. The earthy fragrance, the scent of fallen leaves and cut bracken were good wholesome familiar smells, and his eyes soon began to notice the gold of horse-chestnut leaves, the shining russet of conkers, the prickly coats of sweet chestnut, and the varying shapes and sizes of fallen acorns, not because they were interesting in themselves, but because observation was a habit with him. He strode on through the park, out by a gate in the boundary wall on the north, crossed a farm track, and began to climb the slopes above Templedean. This tract of land was called "the roughs." The soil was too poor for cultivation, and too shallow for big trees, but there was a fine undergrowth in which dogwood, spindle berry, Viburnum and wild clematis made a riot of colour. As Standish walked, he made a strong effort of will to avoid thinking of the nightmare of troubles in which he was involved; by sheer determination he concentrated on his walk and the familiar things around him. He had left the path and was walking westward over the rough ground, while the sky paled and the mist began to form away below him.

Walking thus, he arrived at last at Bury Wood, and he halted suddenly, as though undecided whether to go on or to turn back. As he stood there, he heard footsteps a short distance away, and a voice said: "Say what you like, this place didn't set itself on fire. It was fired right enough, and I'd lay any money I could put my finger on the chap who did it."

"Maybe you could," grumbled another man's voice, "but I don't see the sense of watching here all night. 'Tain't likely he's going to come back and try again, just to oblige."

Standish did not wait to hear any more. Silently, like a shadow, he moved away downhill, towards the mists which blanketed the hollows far below.

Elizabeth Barton was frying bacon and chips for supper when she heard a knock on the kitchen door, and she was no better pleased than any other housewife would have been to be interrupted in the middle of cooking supper. She went to the door and found herself face to face with Herbert Standish. Of all visitors, he was the least welcome, and Elizabeth stared stonily at the pallid face and sunken eyes of the man who stood at the kitchen door.

"I'm so sorry to bother you. . . . Is your husband in?" asked Standish.

"Yes. He's in. He's in his bath at the moment. He's had a long day, and so have I. Is it anything important?"

"No. I mean—I just wanted to talk to him. . . ."

Standish stood there at the door, tongue-tied and awkward, but he made no move to go away. Short of shutting the door in his face, thought Elizabeth, there seemed no way of getting rid of him, since her very discouraging opening speech had not succeeded in doing so. With set face and in a cold formal voice Elizabeth said: "Then please come in. I will tell Gilbert you are here. This way, please."

She led him across the gay warm kitchen, along the passage and into the small morning room. There was no fire here, and the room felt chilly and unwelcoming, but Elizabeth left him there and ran upstairs to the bathroom, where her husband lay luxuriating in the superb new bath amid clouds of fragrant steam.

“Darling, Standish has just come. I told him you were having a bath and tried to get rid of him, but he just wouldn’t go. I think it’s frightful. Can I boot him out?”

“Good God, no. Of course you can’t, Liza. Tell him I’ll be down in a minute.”

Elizabeth sat on the side of the bath. “But, Gilbert, we *can’t*. Half an hour ago I was saying the most awful things about him to the Chief Inspector. I can’t just be two-faced and pretend everything’s normal. You’d much better let me get rid of him. You’re no earthly good at that sort of thing.”

“Did he say what he wanted?”

“He wants to talk. He looks as though all the devils in hell are after him.”

Gilbert heaved himself up out of the good hot water. “I’ll be down in two twos, Liza. Give him a drink.”

“I will *not* give him a drink,” she retorted, “and supper will be ready in ten minutes. And I have not cooked enough for three. There’s supper for two only. Got that? He’s in the morning room and it’s as cold as charity, so you’d better put a pull-over on——”

“The morning room? My God, I hope he hasn’t heard every word you’ve said,” groaned Gilbert. “The acoustics of this house are past comprehension.”

Elizabeth had run downstairs again, and Gilbert Barton towelled himself furiously and struggled into a clean shirt and flannel bags, forgetting the pull-over his wife had advised. Five minutes later he went into the morning room, saying, “Hullo, what a rotten place this looks in the evening, like a dentist’s waiting room. Come into our parlour, there’s a fire in there. You look half frozen.”

The farmer’s cheerful, normal voice brought the colour back into the other man’s peaked face.

“Look here, Barton. I’m damned sorry to be a nuisance. I could see your wife wished me at Jericho, but I got so hipped—— The whole thing’s so frightful. If only I could talk to you for a bit——”

“Come on into the next room and have a drink,” said Barton. “Things never look so bad after a drink.”

He led the way across the hall into the white-panelled drawing room. Here a great log fire burnt merrily on the open hearth, the firelight gleaming on Elizabeth’s new cretonnes, and on the polished rosewood and mahogany of the good old furniture which she and Gilbert had bid for at country sales. There was a sherry decanter and glasses set out, but Gilbert fetched his one and only bottle of whisky from a corner cupboard and poured out a stiff drink.

“Get outside that,” he said, “and let the talking wait. I’ll just go and have a word with Liza. . . .”

A few moments later he was back, and Elizabeth with him.

“I’ve got to say what I think, Mr. Standish. Gilbert doesn’t want me to, but I can’t be two-faced. I don’t think it’s any use talking. Now the Scotland Yard man’s come, he’s the right to expect us to be frank. Whatever you say here may be passed on, as evidence. We’ve got past the stage when we can have private conversations.”

Elizabeth’s clear cold tones seemed to have a tonic effect on Standish; he straightened his bent shoulders and faced her with his chin up.

“All right,” he replied quietly. “I accept that, Mrs. Barton. You think I killed both of them, don’t you? or perhaps you think that is the most acceptable explanation. You’re not alone in thinking so.”

“Look here, Standish,” broke in Gilbert Barton, but Standish interrupted him.

“You see, you can’t understand what it feels like, Barton. You’ve got your wife to talk to; whatever you’d done, she’d understand. Then there’s Beach; he knows he’s suspected too, but he’s got a wife, and Walter Vanstead is Beach’s friend. He goes and talks to him. I’ve got nobody to talk to. I met Mr. Vanstead in the grounds, and he walked past me as though I didn’t exist. The Chief Inspector has given orders that I’m not to be allowed to see Sir Charles. Miss Vanstead is staying in her own room so as to avoid the necessity of having dinner with me. I came here because you were the only person I could talk to. It may be feeble, but there it is.”

Barton rumbled up his hair, his square brow furrowed in consternation. “I don’t know if it helps to say that I sympathise, Standish,” he said slowly. “You see, I happen to realise that some of the local gossips are listing *me* as a possible, too, and what you’ve said about me having my wife to talk to is perfectly true. It does help.”

Elizabeth gave a sound of exasperation, and her husband turned to her quickly. “You don’t know what village gossip is capable of, Liza. I do. I haven’t got this place into order after years of neglect without making some enemies. There are one or two chaps who’ve been suggesting that Gerald Vanstead’s death was a bit of luck for me. And as for Alan, perhaps it was safer to put him out of the way before he remembered some odd fact which threw light on that motoring smash which killed his father.”

“Even though somebody suggested you killed Gerald Vanstead, nobody can suggest you killed the boy,” she cried indignantly.

“No,” replied Barton, “but somebody may suggest you did it for me. Remember, there’s no direct evidence, only a lot of rumour. Throw enough mud and some of it sticks. A little fellow feeling is a wholesome quality.”

Elizabeth gave a gasp, and her husband went on placidly: “Have a drink, Liza. I know you didn’t do it, and you know I didn’t do it, but you might admit that it helps having one another as supporters.”

“All right,” she said, “I’ll admit that.” She turned to Standish.

“I’ve been beastly to you, but at least I’ve tried to be fair. Don’t let’s talk about it any longer. I’ve cooked the supper, and it’ll spoil if I leave it in the oven. Such as it is, will you stay and share it?”

It was Barton who replied: “Yes, he’s going to stay and eat fried chips and bacon.”

Standish shook his head. “No, I won’t stay, thank you very much all the same. You may not believe it, but I feel a lot better for coming here. I can face the rest of the evening by myself now.”

“Now you’ve made *me* feel awful,” cried Elizabeth. “You’re Gilbert’s friend, and I want to be fair. Please stay. If it’ll make you feel any better, won’t you just say, straight and plain, ‘I didn’t kill either of them. I know nothing whatever about it?’”

Standish stood very still, his pallid face twisting. “No,” he replied at length, almost in a whisper, “I can’t even say that. Good-bye.”

He turned to the door, but Gilbert Barton moved quickly after him. “You can’t go like that, Standish, or if you do I’m coming with you.”

“No.” There was resolution in the flat voice now. “I’ve got to see this thing through by myself. You’ve been decent to me, Barton, I shan’t forget it; but for God’s sake, leave me alone now. I ought never to have come.”

Gilbert threw up his hands in a helpless gesture as they heard the front door shut behind Standish. Elizabeth shivered.

“That was awful,” she said. “So he *did* do it—after all.”

Gilbert gave a shout of exasperation. “My good girl, you’ve got it all wrong. Can’t you see he thinks *we* did it? It sticks out a mile. He thinks we did it, and he knows he’s getting the blame.”

“But he *can’t*,” gasped Elizabeth.

“The point is, he does,” said Barton grimly. “What does A do now?”

“A eats his supper, chips and bacon. It’s the only sensible thing to do,” rejoined Elizabeth.

4

They ate their supper in the great kitchen which Judith Vanstead had had made so cheerful and comfortable for them. By common consent they made no mention of the tragedy which shadowed Templedean. Gilbert was hungry, as all farmers are hungry after a hard day’s work. He tucked into the fried ham and chips, and ate three helpings of Elizabeth’s apple pie, pouring cream over it with his usual prodigality. He commended the cream cheese which Elizabeth had made, and talked about the possibility of getting the old cheese press to work again, his voice quite cheerful and normal. It wasn’t until they were in the parlour again that the inevitable theme recurred. Elizabeth came and sat on the Chesterfield, settling snugly against her husband’s shoulder.

“It’s quite true what you said, Gilbert. It does make a difference to have someone to talk to.”

“Of course it does, Liza. Think of that poor devil. He’s been proud of living at Templedean, proud of being treated as ‘one of the family’—as he thought. But he isn’t one of the family. Now they’re in trouble the family hang together, and Standish is shut out. The servants dislike him—he’s always tried to be highhanded with them and they’ve seen through him. University degrees don’t matter to chaps like Saunders and Beach; they know what they mean by ‘gentry’ and Standish isn’t gentry. So he hasn’t a friend in the world. That’s why I tried to make him stay this evening.”

“But, Gilbert, you can’t really believe that Standish thinks *we* did it?”

“I do. You see I’ve talked to Standish quite a lot since Gerald got his ticket, and several times I’ve wondered what he was getting at when he asked his indirect questions.”

“But what evidence has he?”

“What evidence is there against him, for that matter? Try to look at the thing objectively, Liza. Standish warned me that Gerald would boot me as soon as he inherited. Standish knew I didn’t want to be booted. I wanted to marry you and settle down here. Standish knew I’d talked to Gerald quite a bit. I’d been in his car; I knew, from firsthand experience, how he drove. And I’m quite a competent mechanic, a much better one than Standish is. It’s quite as reasonable for him to suspect me as it is for me to suspect him. I’ve always admitted that.”

Elizabeth shivered. “I still don’t believe he can think you—we—did it.”

“You didn’t contradict him when he said, ‘I know you think I did it,’ Liza. The main difference between us is that you and I are sitting by a comfortable fire, consoling one another, while Standish is probably wandering miserably about the countryside, knowing he’s suspected, and without a soul in the world to believe in him. It’s a damned rotten business, Liza. Let’s not talk about it any more.”

He got up and turned on the radio, and Elizabeth sat with a stony face while roars of laughter filled the room as a studio audience laughed their heads off. Unlike Elizabeth, they still found life funny.

Chapter 14

1

When Walter Vanstead left Beach, he walked back to the house, deliberately ignoring Standish as he passed him. Going up to his own room, he bathed and changed, dressing with his customary leisureliness and care, and then went down to the smoking room, poured himself out a drink and rang for Saunders. When the butler came, Vanstead spoke in his usual level tones.

"I'm driving over to Stonor House, Saunders, Major Parker's place. If I'm wanted for any reason, you know the telephone number."

"Very good, sir. I should like to say how deeply we all regret the worry the family is being caused. It makes me very indignant, sir, that the police can take such liberties."

"Oh, there's something behind it, Saunders," said Vanstead easily, "some information that we haven't got. The probability is that some Tom, Dick or Harry has written anonymous letters to the police, accusing God knows who. The police have to look into things like that. After all, I suppose it's what they're paid for."

"Yes, sir, a very good way of looking at it, if I may say so," rejoined Saunders, "but I don't like seeing the police in the house, sir."

"I don't suppose any of us like it," rejoined Vanstead dryly. "Certainly I don't. And I don't like their assumption of authority. The police are public servants, and they need reminding of it. But the best thing is to disregard them as much as possible and behave as though everything were normal. That's why I'm keeping my dinner appointment."

He reached for his coat, which was lying on a chair, and Saunders picked it up and helped Vanstead into it with the neatness of a well-trained manservant.

"Thanks. By the way, Saunders. When Miss Vanstead set out in her car for that damned picnic, she left the boy to wait for Miss Hobart—in the hall, wasn't he?"

"Yes, sir. In the hall or on the terrace. I made a point of being at hand until Miss Hobart arrived."

"Were you in the hall all the time?"

"Either in the hall or the dining room, sir. I kept the door of the dining room open."

"I can well believe it, Saunders. So you are quite certain that nobody came into the hall while Alan was waiting there?"

"I did not observe anyone, sir. No visitor arrived. I'm quite sure of that, because I kept an eye open for Miss Hobart."

"Did you hear Beach when he brought the car round for me?"

"No, sir. I went back to the pantry after the pony cart drove off."

Vanstead nodded. "All right, Saunders. Now you know that a night nurse is arriving this evening?"

"Yes, sir. Miss Vanstead informed me. Mrs. Newby is making all arrangements for meals, just as before. I gather that everything was satisfactory when Sister Temple was here."

"I'm sure it was. Well, Saunders, we look to you to maintain discipline in the servants' hall. Try to stop any undesirable gossip."

"Yes, sir. You can rely on me to do so."

“Good. I’ll let myself in when I come back; you needn’t sit up.”

“Thank you, sir.”

2

After Walter Vanstead had driven away in the Daimler, the great house seemed very quiet. Saunders went methodically round the windows and garden doors, seeing that everything was secure before he had his own dinner. After he had gone through the swing door to the servants’ quarters, the only other person who came through was Annie, carrying the tray for Standish, a job which Saunders had deputed to her. When Annie came back to collect the soup and bird to be kept warm, she became suddenly aware of the silence about her and the solitary feeling of the great house. Mr. Walter was out, Mr. Standish was out, Miss Judith was upstairs, so all the range of ground-floor rooms was empty—dining room, drawing room, morning room, library, smoking room, boudoir, gun room, flower room, garden room and all the rest.

“Goodness—I don’t like it. It seems dead,” said Annie to herself. “Deary me, whatever is going to happen? Seems as though it’s all waiting. . . .” She scuttled back to the cheerful kitchen, and then went on into the servants’ dining hall, glad to be with her fellows and to hear the cheerful normality of their voices.

It was nine o’clock before the night nurse arrived. She had been driven from Oxford, but her instructions had come from London, and she knew of the events which had befallen at Templedean Place. Met in the great entrance hall by the housekeeper, then taken up to Judith Vanstead’s room, then led to her own room, Nurse Wilson arrived at length in the wide corridor outside Sir Charles Vanstead’s room. Here, at a table, sat Nurse Dormer. She had an easy chair and a pleasant hand lamp, and she looked homely enough in the soft light, her cap and apron as crisp and fresh as could be. When Nurse Wilson saw her colleague, she turned to the housekeeper who had been her guide.

“Thank you very much. Good night.”

“Good night, Nurse. I hope you’ll have a quiet night.” The housekeeper retraced her steps, and Nurse Dormer advanced to meet the newcomer.

“Good evening. I stayed on duty till you came. One of us is supposed to be with the patient all the time, but I know he hates it, so I’ve had that table put there. You can see both the doors of his rooms, so I think that’s good enough.”

Her voice was very low, and her round face looked both tired and troubled. “You know—about things here?”

Nurse Wilson nodded. “Yes, I know. I expect it’s been pretty frightful for you.”

“It’s like a nightmare,” murmured the other. “You just wait for something else to happen. Now the orders are that no one is to go in to see Sir Charles, not even his daughter. I do think that’s a bit hard. She adores him. As for our job, it’s just watching. It isn’t nursing. There isn’t any nursing to do, not at night anyway. He doesn’t sleep much, but he’s perfectly quiet and he does like to be alone and to have the lights out. I don’t know if you can keep awake in the dark—I know I can’t, but I feel like a jailer sitting there, watching his door.”

“Can you take me in to see him?”

“Of course. He knows you’re coming. You’ll find he’s a perfect dear. No trouble at all. Come along in and you can see where everything is. You’ll have to decide for yourself whether you stay in his room, but he’d much rather you didn’t. He likes the window right open, so that he can see the sky. He knows all the stars.”

The two women walked softly along the corridor and Nurse Dormer opened the bedroom door.

“May I bring Nurse Wilson in, Sir Charles? She just wants to find her way about.”

She put a switch down, and a faint shaded light lit up the big bedroom. Nurse Wilson walked across to the bed and glanced across to the open window.

“Good evening,” she said. “You’re like me, you enjoy the moonlight. A lot of people hate it.”

“The harvest moon, the best moon of all,” murmured the old man.

“You don’t want to spoil it with electric light.” She smiled. “I won’t be a minute; it’s just to look round and see where things are. I promise not to bother you. I’ll look in occasionally to see if you want anything, but I’ll be very quiet.”

As she spoke she took in the arrangement and furniture of the room with a quick professional interest, then followed Nurse Dormer into the bathroom and dressing room which opened out of the bedroom, saw at a glance the nurse’s table with its medicines and glasses and other apparatus and then went back to the bedroom.

“You’ll promise to ring, and to ask me for anything you want?” she said to Sir Charles. “I quite understand you find it’s more restful to be alone, and not to leave the light on unless you want it, but you’ll remember I’m here, and that I want to be helpful?”

He smiled. “I’ll remember.”

“Then we’ll leave you to enjoy the moon and the stars.” She stood for a few moments with her fingers on his wrist, feeling the faint indomitable pulse which ticked so steadily for all its faintness, and then said “Good night,” and smiled down at him.

The two women went out into the corridor again, having put out the light in Sir Charles’s room, and moved away from the closed door.

“Nothing to worry about from the nursing point of view,” murmured Nurse Wilson. “Cases like that can go on for months. That’s a lovely big window—I suppose it’s impossible for anybody to get in that way?”

“Quite impossible—and I think there’s a man on duty down in the garden,” replied Nurse Dormer. “I’ve never met anything quite like this before.”

“It must have been rather shattering,” murmured Nurse Wilson, careful not to say that to her the experience was not new. It was all in the day’s, or night’s, work.

“And I’ve promised to keep an eye on Miss Vanstead,” said Nurse Dormer, striving to speak in tones of professional calm. “The Chief Inspector is very concerned about her. I suppose the long and the short of it is that he’s certain there’s a poisoner in the house, and anything may happen. Sorry to welcome you with such a tale of trouble, but it’s better for you to know.”

“Much better,” replied Nurse Wilson calmly. “Can you tell me who lives here?—the family, I mean, so that I shall know who’s who if any of them come along in the night.”

Her voice was a faint murmur, and she spoke close to the other’s ear.

“Of course. There’s Miss Vanstead; you’ve seen her. She’s really an angel, and devoted to her father. There’s Mr. Walter Vanstead, Sir Charles’s brother. He’s about seventy, I suppose, but very well groomed and fresh looking. He’s a bit disposed to try ordering you about, very sharp and abrupt.”

“And you don’t like him?”

“No, but that’s nothing to go by. He’s out, by the way, so he may come along making enquiries when he comes in. The only other person is Mr. Standish, Sir Charles’s secretary.

He's about forty, a bit thin and bilious looking, and very much used to going in and out of the patient's room. That's all, except the servants. I expect Stubbs will come along and speak to you any minute now; he's Sir Charles's personal servant, and he's very competent. He's allowed in the patient's room. I think he generally goes in to see Sir Charles about midnight and again about five o'clock. He knows everything he wants. Oh, here is Stubbs."

The manservant came along the corridor quite noiselessly. He wore a white coat and soft slippers and he moved as soundlessly as a cat.

"This is Nurse Wilson, Stubbs. She agrees with me that there is no need to sit in Sir Charles's room all the time; it only disturbs him."

"Good evening, Nurse. I'm glad you think that. It always fretted him having a nurse in his room all night—even Sister Temple found it was better to let him have his way. I just wanted to tell you my room's at the end of the passage there, and you've got a bell on the table there to call me. If you want anything I'm there to get it. There's an electric kettle and tea things on the table in your sitting room. When you feel like a meal, or want to move, I'll come and take duty here."

"Thank you very much. That all seems quite straightforward. Does the patient have anything in the night?"

"I often get him a hot drink if he fancies one," replied Stubbs. "Sometimes he'll take a little hot milk with a spot of brandy in it, or maybe some broth, not more than a mouthful. The doctor says let him have what he likes. He often sleeps a bit between twelve and four, but not much after that."

"No sleeping tablets?"

"No. He can't abide them."

"Stubbs has been doing night duty ever since Sister Temple left," put in Nurse Dormer. "I don't believe he ever goes to sleep at all."

"Oh yes I do, Nurse. I used to be in the Navy—I can sleep any time, anyhow, and with you here I've precious little to do in the day." He turned to Nurse Wilson. "Blooming marvel, isn't he?" he said, cocking his chin at the bedroom door. "What he's lived through! I often tell him he'll see us all out. Spirit's what does it. Will to live and that. Well, remember I'm here, Nurse, always on hand."

He nodded and moved away again towards his own room, and Nurse Wilson breathed one question in Nurse Dormer's ear.

"Trustworthy?"

"Absolutely. He's a wonderful nurse too."

"It seems to me I'm almost redundant then."

"It's your authority, dear," replied Nurse Dormer. "No one will try giving you orders."

"Well, if they try it on, I'll cope," said the night nurse placidly. "You run along and get to bed and forget all your worries. I know you're tired out."

"I'm dog tired." The other sighed. "It's just the strain. I try to keep calm and collected, but I keep on thinking about it. Good night. I'm so glad you've come, dear. I do hope everything will be all right."

After Nurse Dormer had flitted away down the corridor, the new night nurse sat down in the easy chair and looked thoughtfully round her, memorising all that she knew of the house.

She remembered the big staircase and the west corridor which led to Judith Vanstead's room. In the corridor where she now sat there were the two doors leading to Sir Charles Vanstead's room, a door which led to the room which had been adapted as the nurses' sitting room, and the door of Stubbs's room. Beyond that the corridor turned at right angles, to the east wing of the house. Nurse Wilson got up and walked quietly along the corridor to the big main landing to make sure that she remembered the position of the light switches. She ascertained that her own hand lamp was plugged into a wall point, and she parted the heavy brocade curtains which hung over the window embrasures and ascertained that each space was empty. She noted the bell push on the nurse's table which connected to Stubbs's room, and the electric bell outside Sir Charles's room which would ring if the patient wanted her. There was also a house telephone in a small wall cabinet close at hand. Laying her own very efficient torch on the table, Mary Wilson reflected that there was no set of circumstances which could put all these items of apparatus out of order simultaneously, and she took up her knitting and settled to work. Anyone glancing towards her along the corridor would have seen nothing but a pleasant picture of a uniformed nurse, whiling away the tedious hours of night duty with knitting and an open book. Few would have noticed that the book remained unread, or guess that the nurse's ears were alert to register every remote sound in the big house beyond her vision.

She heard quiet footsteps in the hall below, doors being opened and closed, switches being put up or down, and guessed that Saunders was doing his final rounds. Later, from somewhere very far away, there were sounds which indicated that the servants were going upstairs to bed. Then, after a period of silence, came the click of a latch and footsteps crossing the main hall below. Then someone mounted the stairs and stood still for a while on the main landing. Nurse Wilson could not see the person, and eventually the footsteps sounded again, getting fainter as they proceeded towards the west wing, in the direction of Judith Vanstead's room. Nurse Wilson pressed the bell which summoned Stubbs, and he appeared almost immediately.

"Somebody has just come in, and gone along towards the west wing," she whispered.

"It's Mr. Standish," he replied. "I heard him come in; he uses the door in the garden room."

"Does he sleep in the west wing?"

"No. I'll just slip along—— Wait a minute, though . . ."

The sound of voices came faintly from the far side of the house. "That's Nurse Dormer. She's talking to him," murmured Stubbs. "I'll go as far as the landing, just in case . . ."

4

Nurse Dormer felt utterly bewildered. This house, which had once seemed so peaceful, so desirable from the point of view of a nurse who liked "nice people," had suddenly changed its character and become terrifying. Even when she got back to her own bedroom, leaving the night nurse in charge of her patient, Nurse Dormer could not indulge in her usual comfortable routine of a hot bath and a nice read in her luxurious bed. She had promised to keep an eye on Judith Vanstead. Being a very conscientious young woman, Nurse Dormer had no thought at all of going to bed. It was not that which troubled her; it was the sense of trying to grapple with something which she did not understand.

She went into her bedroom, switched on the electric hot plate and made a cup of Horlick's. "She probably won't want it, but it'll make a good excuse for going to see how the poor thing

is,” said Nurse Dormer to herself. “I do think it’s awful for her, and she looked like death, just utterly exhausted. . . .”

With a covered jug on her tray and some biscuits beside it (her own pleasant indulgence last thing every night), the nurse went downstairs to the first floor and turned towards the west wing, switching on the corridor light as she passed. It was good training which enabled her to hold her tray steady and not spill the hot drink when she saw a man’s figure standing in the corridor outside Miss Vanstead’s bedroom. The man turned suddenly to face her as the light was switched on, and Nurse Dormer recognised Herbert Standish standing there, looking whitefaced and startled. He took a few steps towards her.

“Oh . . . Nurse . . . I have brought a book for Miss Vanstead. It’s one she said she wanted, and I know she often reads at night. I thought she might be glad of it, she looked so upset.”

“Put it down on the table then, and I’ll give it to her,” rejoined the nurse. “As for being upset, Mr. Standish, I think we’re all upset, but the best thing you can do is to go up to bed and behave sensibly. I’m taking Miss Vanstead a hot drink, hoping she’ll settle down to sleep, so please go upstairs quietly and don’t come down here again.”

“Yes. Of course,” murmured Standish. “Is she—all right?”

“Of course she’s all right—just tired out, and I don’t wonder at it. Run along now. It’s late.” She spoke tartly, aware that her own nerves were on edge, and that it would be a relief to hurl the jug of Horlick’s at Standish, so far had the events of the evening undermined her professional imperturbability.

Standish turned away, muttering, “Good night,” and Nurse Dormer knocked on Judith’s door. There was no reply, and the nurse opened the door and went inside, her heart pounding unreasonably. The room was empty, but just as Nurse Dormer was “fearing the worst” (as she put it when describing the scene later), Judith Vanstead opened the bathroom door and came back into the bedroom.

Nurse Dormer pulled herself together. “I’ve brought you a hot drink, Miss Vanstead. I thought it might help you to sleep. A good night’s rest would help you more than anything.”

“How kind of you. Nurse! You ought to be in bed yourself, it’s nearly eleven. Did you like Nurse Wilson?”

“Oh yes. She seems very sensible. I’m sure she won’t worry Sir Charles, but she’s there if he wants anything. Have you got a hot bottle?”

“Yes, thanks. By the way, didn’t I hear someone talking to you just now?”

“Oh yes, I forgot. Mr. Standish left a book outside for you. He said it was one you wanted, but if you’ll take my advice, you won’t begin to read. Just get into bed, have your hot drink and an aspirin, and settle down to sleep. Remember Nurse Wilson’s here and I’m here, and there’s nothing to worry about.”

Judith sat down on the bed. “I can’t help worrying, Nurse. The whole thing is so appalling. I just can’t imagine what set the police thinking of all this horror. They take every simple straightforward statement and twist it until it means something quite different.”

“Now do try not to think of it any more,” said Nurse Dormer. “It’s just a fuss—nothing more. I’m not going to have you worrying yourself ill like this, especially when our patient is doing so well. Nurse Wilson said what a wonderful pulse he had. And if you knock yourself up, it’ll do him no good, will it? So get into bed and have your hot drink, and remember everything always seems better in the morning.”

Before Nurse Dormer left Judith, she glanced carefully round the room. She took the cut-glass jug of water away from the bedside table and refilled it in the bathroom, locking the bathroom door as she returned, and putting the key in her own pocket. She surreptitiously removed Judith's own bottle of aspirin and replaced it by her own.

"Now I want you to promise to lie still, dear, and give yourself a chance to sleep," she said, with professional brightness. "Don't get up and begin wandering round, you'll only get cold. Is there anything else I can get you, anything at all you want?"

"Nothing, thank you," said Judith, sinking back on her pillows. "That drink was good. I think I shall sleep, now. I know I can't go along to Father, as I generally do. Did Nurse Wilson know how he liked his window?"

"Yes. His window's wide open, and the moonlight's lovely. Now sleep well, and remember how well our patient is doing. That's everything, isn't it? Good night."

"And I hope to goodness everything *is* all right," said the nurse to herself as she closed the bedroom door. "Oh dear, there's his beastly book, I'd better take it along with me in case he sees it. I wonder if he *did* go to bed. I don't like to think of him wandering round the house. . . . Could I have asked her to lock her door? No, that's no good. If she did I couldn't get in there myself. . . . Oh damn, what ought I to do? . . . What's that? It's a car at the front door. . . ."

Nurse Dormer switched off the passage light and tiptoed a little way towards the big landing at the stairhead. There was a light burning in the great hall below, and as she peered round the corner she saw Standish again. Apparently he had been downstairs. He was coming up now, but had halted indeterminately, and was looking towards the screens which were drawn across the entrance door in the evenings. Glancing across the landing, Nurse Dormer felt comforted when she saw Stubbs in the corridor on the other side. Moving with deliberate professional decorum, she crossed the landing and went towards him.

"I've just settled Miss Vanstead for the night, Stubbs, but I don't like to go up to my room. Mr. Standish keeps wandering about."

"You leave that to me, Nurse. I can keep an eye on both sides from here. Did he tell you what he was doing, wandering along there?"

"He said he wanted to give Miss Vanstead a book. He looked awful, Stubbs, all white and wild."

"He took it to heart badly, I reckon, when he heard he couldn't see Sir Charles. I'd've felt the same myself. That's Mr. Walter come in now. I hope they don't start arguing down there. Dog and cat they are, and no mistake. Six to one and half a dozen to the other if you ask me. You go along to bed, Nurse. You've had a day of it."

"I'm not going to bed tonight. I'll lie down in my room for an hour or two, then I'll come down and peep in at Miss Vanstead."

"Right-o, Nurse, but don't you let things get on your nerves. It's all guesswork when all's said and done."

"Then you think the police are all wrong?"

"Wrong or right, I'm not going to worry about no police. I've got my job to do, and you've got yours, and that's all there is to it. You pop off and have a bit of shut-eye, Nurse. If I see Standish wandering round I'll just tell him to hop it."

"I'm jolly glad you're here. This sort of thing isn't in my line at all," said Nurse Dormer, as she turned back towards her own room.

Chapter 15

1

When Nurse Dormer had gone into Judith's room, after telling Standish to go to bed, the latter had turned towards the stairway which would take him to his own room, and had then changed his mind and gone downstairs for a drink. Standish was an abstemious man by nature, and he did not generally care much for drinks. When he came to Templedean he took to drinking wine with his meals just because the other members of the household did so and he was anxious to conform, but he had no palate for wines. Had he been blindfolded he would have been hard put to it to say what was in his glass. Neither did he like the taste of whisky, though its warming and stimulating qualities seemed worth while if he were tired or cold. But he had no head for drinks, and he knew it.

Standish had been glad of the stiff whisky which Gilbert Barton had given him earlier that evening; it had helped to strengthen wavering nerves and courage, and given him enough energy to walk some ten miles cross-country after he had left the Bartons.

After talking to Nurse Dormer, a black depression had assailed him again, and he went downstairs for a nightcap. As he stood by the smoking-room fire, which still glowed faintly amid a heap of wood ash, Standish realised he was slightly drunk. He had had no dinner and no tea, and had walked until he had tired himself out. The first few gulps of whisky sufficed to make his head spin a little; the remainder of the glass seemed to steady him and put fresh life into him. He started to go upstairs again, feeling that bed was a good place and that he would fall asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow.

He was halfway upstairs when he heard the car pull up in the drive and the front door open. Turning round to see who was coming into the house, Standish saw Walter Vanstead. Had it not been for the whisky which he had just drunk, Standish would have ignored Vanstead and gone on up to bed. As it was, warmed to self-confidence and an unusual degree of truculence, Standish turned about and went downstairs again, following Vanstead into the smoking room. The latter was also pouring himself out a drink. When Standish appeared, the older man scowled at him.

"What the hell do *you* want?" he enquired. "You might have the common sense to keep out of the way."

Standish stood by the door, swaying slightly, quite unaware of the ridiculous figure he cut in the old man's eyes. Usually trim and neat to the point of old maidishness, his lank hair was now falling over his forehead, the collar of his raincoat was awry, and his face was flushed.

"When I met you in the garden this evening, Mr. Vanstead, you chose to ignore me," he began, speaking, he thought, with dignity.

Vanstead cut in contemptuously. "You're drunk!" he said disgustedly, "Go to hell out of this. I don't buy whisky for you to get sozzled on."

"I am not drunk. You are making a great mistake in behaving like this," persisted Standish.

The older man took a step towards him. "That's the door. Get out of it," he snapped. "You've made trouble enough here already. You're leaving this house in the morning in any case. If you're not careful I'll have you chucked out of it now."

He swung round and moved as though to ring the bell beside the fireplace.

"I shouldn't if I were you," persisted Standish. "You talk about trouble. You're asking for it and you'll get it. I know more than you realise."

"I've no doubt you do, you swine," retorted Vanstead furiously. "You know all about everything. Fortunately the police are beginning to realise it. It's you, and you alone, who is at the bottom of all this trouble. I've realised at last what you were up to, and so has my niece, thank God. She never regarded you as anything but a rank outsider, though you have the consummate conceit to imagine you'd won her affection——"

Standish gave a cry of rage that was at once shrill and anguished. Stubbs, on the landing, heard it and came flying downstairs.

"My God, they're at it, the silly bastards!" he exclaimed to himself. He heard the crash of glass, the bang of overturned furniture, and as he flung the door open Walter Vanstead was just staggering uncertainly to his feet. Standish lay still on the floor, face downwards, a sprawling ungainly figure.

"The scoundrel attacked me, Stubbs," panted Vanstead. "He tried to murder me with that bottle. He was drunk."

"I don't care the heck how drunk he was," whispered Stubbs fiercely. "All I care about's the master. How much good is this going to do him? Hadn't you enough sense to prevent his kicking up a row like this almost under his room? Get out, you silly——"

"I tell you, the man attacked me——"

"Maybe he did, and now it's another police job. Haven't we had enough of it? For Mike's sake, go along to your bed, sir, and leave me to do my best with this. Get along, do."

And surprisingly Walter Vanstead obeyed, walking wearily across the room like a very old man.

2

Stubbs hurried over to Standish, full of unease at the sight of the sprawled ungainly figure. Standish was breathing all right, and "bleeding like a stuck pig" observed Stubbs, seeing the scalp wound where the fallen man must have struck his head against the projecting corner of the stone mantel. "He can wait for two-twos," thought Stubbs, and scuttled upstairs.

Walter Vanstead was going along the corridor towards his own room in the west wing. He paused outside Sir Charles's room, and Stubbs hastened him on his way with, "Now get on, do."

Then, knocking sedately, Stubbs went into his master's room. Nurse Wilson stood by the bedside, her soft voice talking easily about noisy people she had known.

Stubbs said cheerfully, "Very sorry about the disturbance, sir. I'm afraid Mr. Standish couldn't carry his nightcap and got mixed up with the furniture."

"I see. And my brother?"

"He's just gone along to bed, sir. I said I'd see to things. Nothing to worry about," said Stubbs easily. "I'll be back in a minute, Nurse."

He slipped out of the room again and hurried back to the stairhead and ran up to Nurse Dormer's room.

"You there, Nurse? Just come and lend a hand."

Nurse Dormer, still in uniform, was at the door in a second. "What is it? Not——"

"It's Standish. Drunk as a lord—bust his head open. Got some plaster and bandages? Right. He's in the smoking room. You just put a first-aid outfit on and tell me if we ought to

get a doctor.”

Stubbs turned away, and a moment later Nurse Dormer ran downstairs after him. When she saw the prone figure and the smashed glass on the floor she looked at Stubbs.

“Him and Mr. Walter had a set-to. Silly jugginses. You’ll want some water. Shan’t be a tick.”

When he came back, Nurse Dormer was bandaging a first-aid pad in place. “You’ll have to get Dr. Rasen, Stubbs. He’ll have to stitch this up; it’s a deep wound and he may have fractured his skull as well. His pulse isn’t any too good.”

“Oh, my eye! Don’t let the silly flat die on us, that’d put the lid on it. Ought I to ring the C.I.D. bloke? If Standish dies, that’s murder, I reckon—and Mr. Walter done it.”

“Go and ring the doctor. He can call the police if he thinks it’s necessary.”

“Righty-o. Give him the baby to hold,” muttered Stubbs.

Nurse Dormer collected some cushions and began to straighten her patient’s limbs, packing his head carefully between the cushions. He had lost a lot of blood and his hands were getting cold. When Stubbs came back, the nurse said, “Get me some rugs, and get some hot-water bottles filled. I’m not going to move him any more until the doctor comes. I expect he’ll send for an ambulance.”

“Cripes! He’s not going to die, is he?”

“I shouldn’t think so, but he’s not too good. Go and get those bottles.”

It was a quarter of an hour before the doctor came, just after midnight. He examined Standish and then said:

“Better get him to hospital. I’ll ring for an ambulance. You’ve got quite enough to keep you busy here without this. How did it happen?”

“I don’t know, Doctor. Stubbs said he was drunk.”

“Drunk, eh? Not like Standish to get drunk, though the whole place reeks of whisky.”

He went out to the telephone, leaving the nurse with Standish. When Dr. Rasen came back, he said, “Was he alone when this happened?”

Nurse Wilson sighed. “Stubbs said that he and Mr. Vanstead had a ‘set-to.’”

Dr. Rasen checked a whistle. “Vanstead, eh? Well, in the circumstances I shall have to report it. Isn’t there ever going to be an end to the trouble in this house?”

3

Macdonald arrived before the ambulance did. Sending Nurse Dormer upstairs to join Nurse Wilson, the C.I.D. man had Stubbs down again.

“Can you tell me what happened, Stubbs?”

“Well, sir, it was a bit of a mix-up. Mr. Standish came in about 10:45. He’d been out all the evening. He went along to Miss Judith’s wing and gave Nurse Dormer a book for her. When she had settled Miss Judith down all comfortable, Nurse comes across to me—I was in the master’s corridor, see—and Nurse says, ‘I don’t like to go up to my room while Mr. Standish is wandering about,’ and I said: ‘I’ll keep an eye on him.’ I could see right across the landing from where I was. It was just then Mr. Walter came in, having been out to dinner over at Stonor House. Mr. Standish, he’s halfway up the stairs, and he turns and looks round and goes down again and follows Mr. Walter to the smoking room. I stood at the top of the stairs. I knew them two had got on each other’s nerves this last day or two, and I was a bit worried.

They was quiet at first, kept their voices down, and then Mr. Walter started shouting, as he's given to when he loses his temper."

"Could you hear what was said?"

"Well, bits of what Mr. Walter said—something about having Mr. Standish chucked out. I couldn't hear what Standish said, he kept his voice down until suddenly he gives a sort of yelp, shrill-like, and then there's a fine old racket, chairs going over and that—you can see for yourself—and I come down at the double, and found Standish laid out. Mr. Walter, he says, 'The scoundrel attacked me, went for me with a bottle. He was drunk,' and I told him I didn't care who was drunk, he could quit making all that row and go to bed. I was thinking of the master and I was proper mad. Mr. Walter goes off to bed—I think he was a bit windy, and I don't wonder at it."

"In your opinion, Stubbs, who went for whom?"

Stubbs shrugged his shoulders. "Not for me to say, sir. I wasn't there."

"I only asked for an opinion, Stubbs."

"Well, sir, it was Mr. Standish who yelped. That wasn't Mr. Walter's voice, and if you ask me, I can't see Standish going for anybody."

"Not even if he was drunk?"

"Well, sir, come to think of it, he wasn't that drunk. He didn't look himself, sort of hot in the face, but no sailor'd ever have called him drunk. A bit lit up, that's all."

"Did you hear Miss Judith's name mentioned while they were quarreling?"

"Not by name, sir. I seem to remember Mr. Walter yelled something about his niece, but I'm not sure."

The sound of a motor engine came from the drive and Macdonald said: "That'll be the ambulance. You can go upstairs again now, and ask Nurse Dormer to come and speak to me in the hall."

The next few minutes were occupied with moving the unconscious Standish. As the stretcher was carried out, Dr. Rasen said resignedly: "I'd better go along to the hospital and see the X ray."

"Wait just a minute," said Macdonald.

Nurse Dormer was then coming downstairs, and Macdonald went to the foot of the stairs to meet her. "I'm afraid you're having more than you—or I—bargained for, Nurse," he said. "I didn't anticipate anything of this kind or I'd have stayed in the house myself. Do you know if the noise has upset Miss Vanstead?"

Nurse Dormer gave a jump as though she had had an electric shock and her hands went up in a gesture of unprofessional horror.

"Miss Vanstead! Oh my God! She *must* have heard."

She turned and raced upstairs and Dr. Rasen exclaimed: "What on earth's the matter now?"

"She has gone up to see if Judith Vanstead is all right. It seems a bit queer if she didn't hear any of the racket. I gather she's generally a poor sleeper."

Rasen stared at Macdonald incredulously, and then the doctor, too, went up the stairs at the double, while Macdonald followed more deliberately.

The C.I.D. man stood at the door of Judith's bedroom and saw the doctor bend to lift one of the sleeping woman's eyelids.

"I expect it's atropine again," said Macdonald quietly, "but it can't have been given very long ago, and you've got the antidotes to hand this time."

“Why didn’t you warn her?” demanded the doctor fiercely.

“I did,” replied Macdonald, “and her father says she’s an intelligent person. Shall I send Nurse Wilson along? Stubbs and I can stay with the old man.”

4

“You had better tell me exactly what has been happening. I always disliked guessing.”

Sir Charles Vanstead’s faint voice had the ironical note which was characteristic of it, and Macdonald replied in a voice which was as calm and practical as though he had been describing a railway journey.

“I will tell you the facts as far as I know them, sir. Shortly after I left here, Standish went out. He walked through the park and across the roughs to Bury Wood, where my men saw him. He then walked down to the Home Farm and stayed talking to the Bartons for a while. After that he walked through Stoke Temple, Overbury and Wychhurst to Quarry Hill, sat there for a while and returned here shortly after half-past ten, coming in by the garden entrance. He went up to the west wing, where Nurse Dormer saw him. Miss Vanstead was not then in bed. After hanging around on the landing for a while, Standish then went down to the smoking room. Here he had a drink, and then, about 11:15, began to go upstairs again. Stubbs was watching on the landing all this while. When Standish was halfway upstairs, the Daimler pulled up at the front door and Mr. Vanstead came in. Standish went downstairs again and followed him to the smoking room. The two men quarrelled, came to blows, and Standish was knocked out. Mr. Vanstead says that Standish attacked him, using the whisky bottle as a weapon.”

The faintest sound of derision came from the bed. “Very unwise of Standish, and very unlike him. Was he drunk?”

“He had had no meal since lunch time; he had walked for many miles in great distress of mind, and he probably had a double whisky when he came in. I gather he seldom drinks; the whisky went to his head, and Mr. Vanstead enraged him.”

“Even so . . .” murmured the ironic voice. “Walter is nearly seventy, but he was a good boxer once. . . . However . . . And my daughter?”

“Miss Vanstead’s maid saw her at half-past ten. Quarter of an hour later Nurse Dormer took her a hot drink and stayed talking to her until after eleven. The nurse emptied the carafe by her bed and refilled it, removed the bottle of aspirin lying there and satisfied herself that there was no other food or drink in the bedroom. The bathroom was locked. Nurse Dormer says that Miss Vanstead was perfectly normal when she left her—tired, but apparently ready for sleep. An hour and a half later she was drugged with atropine. That has been dealt with. She is in no danger from the drug now.”

“And Standish was observed by Stubbs all the time after Nurse Dormer went into my daughter’s room, except, of course, when he was in the smoking room?”

“Yes.”

“Beach drove the Daimler?”

“Yes. He says he took it straight back to the garage and then went to bed.”

“Nurse Wilson came in to me when the noise occurred downstairs. Stubbs went down to the smoking room.”

“Yes. Nurse Dormer was then in her own room, but the landing was under observation.”

There was a long silence. At length Sir Charles asked: "The post mortem on the boy—you have the results?"

"Yes. Death from atropine poisoning."

"The alkaloid?"

"Yes, sir."

Again there was silence. Then Sir Charles said: "Thank you, Chief Inspector."

That was all.

5

Macdonald went to Walter Vanstead's room when he left Sir Charles. When he knocked, a voice bade him come in. Vanstead was sitting by his electric fire, wrapped in a dressing gown, a book in his hand. His face looked grey, but he spoke with his customary tartness.

"Good evening. I hope you're satisfied now as to the identity of the mischief-maker in this house. Standish did his best to murder me. It's true the fellow was drunk, but even so he must be a homicidal maniac."

Macdonald looked at the other reflectively before replying; so far as he could see, Vanstead himself had not suffered any injury in the recent fracas.

"I shall be glad to have your statement if you wish to make one, sir. It is my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used as evidence."

Walter Vanstead stared back in astonishment. "You warn *me*," he exclaimed. "Haven't I made it clear that I was the victim of an unprovoked and murderous attack?"

"I am reminded of the old rhyme, 'The dog it was that died,'" observed Macdonald calmly. "You, who were the victim of a murderous attack, seem to have escaped unscathed, sir. Standish, whom you claim was the aggressor, is at present in hospital with serious head injuries. I am here to listen to your own account of the circumstances which brought this about. Later, I hope, I shall be able to ask Standish for his account. Now, sir."

Macdonald took out his notebook and waited.

Vanstead began: "I had been out to dinner. I returned here about half-past eleven or a little earlier. Standish was then hanging about on the stairs. I went into the smoking room, and a moment later he followed me there. I asked him what he wanted. He began to make some idiotic complaint about my having ignored him earlier in the evening. As soon as he spoke I realised that he was drunk. I told him to clear out. He began to argue, and I told him that if he didn't go I would have him thrown out of the house. He gave a yell like a maniac, snatched up the whisky bottle and came for me, brandishing the bottle over his head. Fortunately, if I haven't much muscle I have a little science. I hit him as he lunged at me, right on the point, and he went down as though he had been shot, and caught his head on the corner of the mantelpiece. Then Stubbs came in. I was both exhausted and disgusted, and I left Stubbs to deal with the fellow."

The abrupt voice ceased, and Macdonald read out the shorthand notes he had written.

"Have you anything to add to that, sir? Any more of your conversation with Standish, for example?"

"There was no further conversation."

Macdonald added the last sentence and closed his notebook. "You may care to reconsider that last statement, sir," he observed. "It happens that your voices were audible to at least one person in the house, possibly to more than one. I must add, for your information, that some

time between eleven and twelve o'clock tonight, Miss Vanstead was poisoned by a dose of atropine. Her condition was discovered in time to avert any serious consequences."

"Judith—poisoned! Good God! Obviously it was Standish—the man's mad."

"There is only one thing certain about this evening's events, sir. Standish could not have entered Miss Vanstead's room unobserved. . . . He was watched from the moment he came upstairs, about a quarter to eleven, until he went back into the smoking room when you came in. Further, there was only a short time when either the night nurse or Stubbs was not on duty on the landing. That was just after you came to bed, when Nurse Wilson was with Sir Charles and Stubbs was helping Nurse Dormer with Standish."

Walter Vanstead stared steadily back at Macdonald. "I see," he said grimly. "After what you have said I prefer to remain silent until I have a lawyer to advise me. I shall be happy to answer any further questions when that proviso is satisfied."

"Certainly," rejoined Macdonald equably. "I will see you in the morning. Good night, sir."

Chapter 16

1

“So, as her parents are abroad, I used my own judgment and sent the child back to school,” explained Miss Hobart. “When I realised that reporters were trying to follow Caroline about in order to ask her unpleasant questions, I felt it was not right to keep her here any longer.”

Miss Hobart looked apologetically at Macdonald. “I’m sorry if I have caused you extra trouble. Perhaps you think I am foolish, but it does seem to me that terrible things *have* been happening here.”

“I don’t think you are foolish at all, Miss Hobart, and I am afraid it is quite true that terrible things *have* been happening here. The child is much better at school, and you acted very wisely in sending her back,” replied Macdonald.

“It’s a great comfort to hear you say that,” went on Miss Hobart. “Of course I asked Caroline what Alan had done while they were playing in the wood, and I thought her answer commendably sensible; I wrote it down. I had better explain that Caroline has known some abnormal children at her own school. She calls them ‘psycho brats.’ ”

Macdonald laughed. “I’ll remember that one. Unhappily our civilisation produces too many problem children.”

“It does indeed, and not only children, I fear,” said Miss Hobart. “Now this is what Caroline said: ‘You see, Auntie, Alan was really a very nasty little boy, even for a psycho brat. I soon cottoned onto that. Of course I could have punched him, but we’re not allowed to punch them at school without permission, so I climbed a tree instead to get out of his way. I knew he hadn’t the spunk to climb himself. It was a nice tree, so I stayed there until I heard him making sick noises. Then I came down and brought him back to you.’ ”

“I agree with you, it is a most sensible statement,” said Macdonald, and Miss Hobart went on:

“Of course I asked her if he’d eaten any berries, and she said, ‘The only thing he could have eaten was bracken, because he sat on a bank covered in bracken, and nothing else ever grows among bracken.’ That is quite true, Chief Inspector. Bracken kills out everything else. Any farmer will tell you that.”

Macdonald nodded. “Yes, I believe you are right. You are interested in plants, Miss Hobart?”

“I am indeed, and not ashamed of it. When I was a child the mechanical age had not dawned, and we walked a lot and interested ourselves in wild flowers and fruits and all the beautiful woodland life which children no longer care for in this age of cars. I always say that children born after 1900 have missed a lot of things, though they never understand what I mean.”

“I understand all right,” replied Macdonald. “You mean that children born after 1900, prosperous ones, that is, always found a car at the door to take them out, and consequently despised walking.”

“Exactly!” said Miss Hobart. “Now we always walked, or else took the pony cart, so nice and leisurely. Consequently we had time to use our eyes. My sisters and I used to collect wild flowers and take them home and find out all about them.”

Macdonald watched the old lady with sympathetic amusement. He liked her. Moreover, he appreciated the fact that she was an intelligent old lady, and he was pretty certain that she was offering him information. Picking up her leisurely clue with corresponding leisureliness, Macdonald said:

“I expect you have retained that interest in wild flowers all your life, Miss Hobart. I wonder if you would like to express an opinion as to whether deadly nightshade grows in Bury Wood?”

“Of course it doesn’t,” said the old lady promptly. “Nightshade is a lime-loving plant. Bury Hill is half gravel. I have known that wood all my life. I have seen it felled and replanted and coppiced. There was never any nightshade growing in Bury Wood, and there is none now.”

There was silence for a moment after the trenchant voice ceased, and then Miss Hobart continued in a more diffident voice: “Perhaps I am wrong to make such emphatic statements. My old friend, Lady Allinger, was very angry with me when I told her that deadly nightshade never grew in Bury Wood. She said that I didn’t realise the implication of what I was saying, but I do realise it, Chief Inspector. It was partly on that account I sent Caroline away.”

“I only wish that other witnesses would give information as precisely as you do, Miss Hobart,” replied Macdonald. “I know that you feel deeply troubled about these events, but since you have had the courage to face one set of implications, I can’t believe that you didn’t think things out a little further, a step farther back, as it were.”

“I did,” replied Miss Hobart unhappily. “I believe that Alan was killed. It is a terrible thing to say, but if I am right, then it seems to me that that motor accident wasn’t an accident at all.”

2

“So you see it gets more and more involved,” said Macdonald. He had told Miss Hobart that Judith Vanstead had herself been in danger of dying of atropine poisoning the previous night, and the old lady sat in shocked silence, her face in her hands.

“I expected something of the kind,” went on Macdonald. “It was the reaction to the calling in of my own department. Gerald Vanstead’s death, and his wife’s, was accepted as an accident. It looked as though the boy’s death might be regarded as accidental, too, and then I was sent here to undertake a more intensive enquiry. It is very difficult to watch an enquiry creeping closer and closer, and to do nothing about it.”

Miss Hobart lifted her face from her hands. “Poor Judith!” she said brokenly. “I have known her from her cradle. In some ways she was the ablest of them all—and such a splendid person. During the war she was a tower of strength to us all, always working so cheerfully. She did a lot of work with the W.V.S., all the unpleasant jobs, like dealing with difficulties over the *évacuées*. Oh dear, it seems so unimportant now, but children with dirty habits caused a lot of trouble. . . . Judith was always ready to go out in any emergency, day or night. She had no chauffeur then, you know, and always drove herself. Her car was always in order, not like so many of the others. We used to say she was as good as a service station in herself—she not only did her own repairs, she helped other people do theirs. Then she helped at the Cottage Hospital too. I’ve seen her on hands and knees, scrubbing. There was nothing she wouldn’t do, and she never failed to turn up—never.”

“Miss Vanstead was at the hospital when she heard of her brother’s death, I believe,” put in Macdonald.

“Yes, she took duty for me, because I had hay fever. I was a broken reed that day. I ought to have gone, but I just gave in and stayed at home and cosseted myself. I’m sorry, Chief Inspector; I’m afraid I am just rambling on, but I’m so terribly upset.”

“I have every sympathy with you, Miss Hobart, and I am sorry that I have had to occasion you further distress.”

“I would much rather hear things from you than be told a garbled version of them by gossips, Chief Inspector. I have known the Vansteads for so many years. I might say I watched the children grow up, and I have always admired Judith. Tell me, have you seen Sir Charles?”

“Yes. He asked to see me. I can best describe him by saying that he is stoic. He no more admits to distress of mind than to pain of body.”

Miss Hobart looked sadly out of the window, gazing at the sunlit beech trees. “I could never forgive him for the way he bullied Gerald,” she said slowly. “I know Gerald was a silly, greedy, cowardly little boy, but with different handling he might have grown up into something worth while. I was often reminded of the way a flock of birds attacks a sickly member of the flock; they were all unkind to Gerald. . . . And now this awful sequence of events seems to be an unending consequence.”

“Events ensure consequences,” said Macdonald quietly, “but in this world, at least, the consequences are not unending.” He got up and held out his hand. “Thank you for answering my questions, Miss Hobart. If I have to go and see Caroline I will be very careful of her peace of mind.”

“I’m sure you will. You’ll like her—such a sensible wholesome child.”

3

It was inevitable that rumour and gossip followed the eventful night at Templedean. The ambulance had been seen in the village, and Dr. Rasen’s late and lengthy visit to the Place provoked a wild crop of suggestions. As was also inevitable, the identity of the patient in the ambulance soon became known; the news leaked out from the Cottage Hospital and spread through the Village. Following on this, some of Judith Vanstead’s friends tried to get in touch with her on the telephone. Saunders, following instructions, replied to each caller that Miss Vanstead was not available at the moment; would they kindly leave a message? The callers then telephoned to one another, and surmise followed surmise. Reports of the prevailing gossip spread up to the Home Farm, and Gilbert Barton was relieved rather than otherwise when he saw Macdonald walking over the Long Meadow towards the farm house. Leaving the tractor engine on which he had been working, Barton went to meet the C.I.D. man.

“For the love of Mike, tell me what’s been happening up there,” he said. “There are the craziest stories going round, and I feel pretty bad about it. Come along in.”

When they were inside the house, Macdonald asked:

“Why should you feel bad about it, anyway?”

“Because Standish came up here yesterday evening. He was obviously feeling as depressed and wretched as a bloke can feel, and I let him go away by himself. Is it true that he’s done himself in?”

“No, it isn’t. So far as I know, he made no attempt to do himself in. I can’t tell you exactly what happened to him, but he certainly got slightly drunk after he got home and either fell—or was tripped up—and cut his head open. Why did you think he was going to do himself in?”

"I told you, he looked nervy and depressed, and walked out of the house looking fit to cut his throat. Then the men told me he'd been found and taken to hospital in an ambulance, with a cop sitting by the driver. What else did you expect me to think? If you'd arrested him, he wouldn't have been taken to hospital. He'd have been taken to the prison infirmary, wouldn't he?"

"Most probably. But I think that some other factor, in addition to logical deduction, caused you to think he might have killed himself, Barton. I want to know what it is."

Barton did not answer. He sat on the edge of the table and fiddled with a box of matches. After a while Macdonald said:

"This is no time to withhold evidence. Things are bad enough. Don't try to make them worse."

"Well, look here, say if you tell me this. Is Miss Vanstead all right? Half the village is saying she's dead too."

"Then half the village is wrong, as usual. An attempt was made to poison her last night, but it was not successful."

"Oh, my God! That's damnable. The chap must be mad. Liza said he looked as though he were going out of his mind." He broke off, and Macdonald stood waiting. At last Barton burst out: "Liza insisted on coming to speak to him. She almost admitted to his face that she suspected him, and then she said: 'Won't you say, quite simply, "I did not kill either of them and I don't know anything about it"?' and he said, 'No, I can't even say that.' It was damned awful. . . ."

"Are you certain of his words?"

"Yes. Perfectly certain."

"And you did nothing about it?"

Barton flushed. "I still didn't believe he'd done it. I thought he was crackers. I said I'd go with him—wherever he was going, but he wouldn't have it. Damn all, it's the sort of thing an ordinary chap can't cope with. Remember, Standish has been my friend; I've liked him. I couldn't see myself ringing you up, and telling you. I thought——" He broke off, as though incapable of putting his thoughts into words, and Macdonald said: "You thought he'd go away and cut his throat quietly, and save you any further embarrassment?"

Barton took his time before replying: "I suppose I deserved that, and it's true, in a sense. I admit I'd rather he cut his own throat than was hanged, or shoved into Broadmoor."

Macdonald turned to the door. "Well, you've told me what I wanted to know. I suggest you sit down and think things over, and decide where your reasoning has gone astray. If that task is beyond you, I'll enlighten you next time I see you."

And with that he was gone before Barton had time for a reply.

Macdonald walked back across the park, thinking as hard as he'd ever thought in his life. From the confusion of last night's happenings two facts had emerged. One was the fact that no one could suggest that Judith Vanstead had been poisoned accidentally. The case was now clearly defined as a criminal case. The second fact was Standish's surprising admission to the Bartons. Macdonald pondered over the words. First Elizabeth Barton, in the presence of her husband, saying: "Won't you say 'I did not kill either of them'?" and Standish replying: "I can't even say that."

Crossing the rose garden, Macdonald rang the bell at the front door. All the doors, which usually stood open, were shut today, and gardeners and keepers patrolled the gardens, lest inquisitive pressmen seek an entrance to the great silent house. Saunders opened the door; he had lost his pompous episcopal expression, and looked scared. Instead of flinging the doors wide open in his usual impressive manner, he peered round the corner of the door, and then hastened to draw back to admit Macdonald.

“Do you know if Miss Vanstead’s maid is in her room, Saunders?”

“Yes, sir. Janet has been with Miss Vanstead since six o’clock this morning. Nurse Dormer went to her own room for a short sleep, but I think she is with Miss Vanstead again now.”

“Then will you come upstairs with me and ask Nurse Dormer to come and speak to me, if she can leave her patient with Janet for a short time,” said Macdonald.

“Certainly, sir. I will do so immediately,” replied Saunders.

The Chief Inspector noted that Saunders was according a greater measure of respect to the C.I.D. this morning. Yesterday Saunders’s manner had been distinctly haughty. They went up the great main staircase together, and Macdonald said:

“I will wait on the landing here. Tell Nurse Dormer not to hurry.”

In a very short while the nurse appeared, fresh looking and composed, so it was difficult to believe that it was she who had gasped out “Oh my God!” when Macdonald had reminded her of Judith last night.

“Good morning. Nurse. I’m afraid you’re doing double duty,” said Macdonald.

“I don’t mind. I had a few hours’ sleep, and I think the poor thing’s glad to have me with her.”

“How is she?”

“Doctor’s quite satisfied. Apart from the upset she’s not much the worse, but she’s worrying and puzzling the whole time. We have done exactly as you said, refused to let her talk and refused to answer any questions. But we can’t go on like that indefinitely. She said just now: ‘You’re treating me as though I were out of my mind.’ It’s bad for her, you know.”

“Yes, I realise that,” said Macdonald. “I think the best thing now is for you to talk to her, if you will. Tell her what happened, that you went in to see how she was and found her drugged.”

“Very well. Then I’m not to mention—the other trouble? Mr. Standish, I mean.”

“No, I shouldn’t say anything about the accident just now. Did Miss Vanstead realise that Standish was outside her door last night?”

“Yes. She heard our voices, and I told her that he’d brought her a book, but I wouldn’t give it to her.”

“Oh yes. Where is that book now?”

“I’ve got it in my room. There’s a letter inside it for her. It fell out when I dropped the book. Can I take it to her?”

“No. Better bring it to me. Will you go and fetch it?”

She nodded and hurried away. When she came back with the book in her hand, Macdonald said:

“It’s possible that Miss Vanstead may worry herself imagining that Standish went into her room last night, when she herself was in the bathroom. Don’t mention him unless she does. Encourage her to tell you what she thinks happened, if she seems disposed to, but if she says that Standish must have come in, tell her it wasn’t possible. He was under observation all the time.”

Nurse Dormer frowned. "But is that true?"

"Yes, Nurse, it is true. I can assure you of that."

She looked at him very hard, and then said: "All right. I'll tell her. And about this book. She's asked for it once already, and I put her off. She can't see to read, anyway—her eyes are still affected—but can I tell her you've got it? I don't want her to think I've lost it."

"Yes. You can tell her I've got it."

Nurse Dormer hesitated a moment and then said: "I've asked Dr. Rasen to get another nurse for Sir Charles. I don't want to let them down, but I've stood as much as I can. The way things are going on here, I just feel it is beyond me. I shall be a mental case myself if I have another night like last night."

Macdonald nodded. "Yes. It was a bit grim. All right, Nurse. I expect Dr. Rasen will be able to get someone else. Thank you for telling me."

"Oh, I shan't go before they've got somebody, but——"

She broke off, and Macdonald said, "You feel you've earned a holiday?"

"I feel I need one," she replied.

5

When she went back into Judith Vanstead's room, Nurse Dormer said: "You had better go and get a meal now, Janet. You've been on duty a long time."

Judith's voice put in: "Yes, and then have a rest, Janet. I'm giving you all such a lot of trouble."

"It's no trouble, miss. You know I'll do anything for you. I'll just go and get my dinner and then I'll be back."

Nurse Dormer took her patient's pulse and temperature and then said brightly:

"Why, that's much better. You're doing nicely now."

"What happened?" asked Judith wearily.

"Well, now you're feeling better, we're wondering if you can't tell us what happened," replied the nurse. "You remember I brought you a hot drink—Horlick's, it was, and I made it myself, and I gave you an aspirin and told you to cuddle down comfortably. That was about eleven o'clock. Somehow I didn't seem able to get to sleep, and I thought I'd come and have a peep at you and see if you'd got to sleep or if you wanted anything, and there you were, snoring like an operation. You didn't half give me a fright."

"I just can't think what happened," said Judith. "Nurse, you don't imagine *I* did it myself, do you? For heaven's sake say so, if you do."

"Of course not," replied Nurse Dormer. "You're not made that way. I know that."

"Thank goodness! I was terrified you wouldn't believe me, especially when you wouldn't let me talk. I've been thinking and thinking. Am I right in remembering that you said Mr. Standish was outside on the landing last night?"

"Yes. You heard him speak to me just before I came in. He was asking after you."

"You didn't put the Horlick's down, did you?"

"Good gracious, no! I had the tray in my hand, and nobody touched it but me."

"Then it must have been the aspirin," said Judith faintly. "I suppose . . . someone . . . came in here when I was in the bathroom and put something in the bottle."

"Oh no, it wasn't the aspirin," said Nurse Dormer. "I brought my own bottle down and gave you one out of that."

“Yes, I know you did. Then could it have been something in the water jug?”

“No, it wasn’t that either, I emptied that jug in the bathroom and rinsed it out and refilled it.”

“Then I suppose it was the second aspirin I took, out of my own bottle. The one you gave me wasn’t enough, so I took another because my head ached so badly.”

“Miss Vanstead, before I left you I took away your bottle of aspirin and I left my own instead, on your table. It was almost a new bottle and it’s got my initials on the label. It was still there when I came in again.”

“Then what could it have been?”

“I don’t know, dear. But it wasn’t the aspirin or the water in the jug.”

“Could someone have come in and given me a hypodermic injection when I was asleep?”

“That might happen in a story book, not in real life. Besides, you swallowed the drug. The doctors know that. You hadn’t any sweets, had you? I know you hadn’t, because we looked.”

“Oh dear . . . It’s simply maddening. Nurse, when you talked to Mr. Standish last night, what did he say?”

“Oh, he asked how you were, and he gave me a book for you.”

“Where is it? Did you give it to me?”

“No. I told you it’d be better if you didn’t do any reading. I took the book upstairs with me. It’s quite safe. You can have it when your eyes are better. There’s a letter in it for you. And just in case you’re worrying about Mr. Standish, I’d better tell you. He didn’t come into your room at all. Someone was watching him all the time.”

“Watching him? Why?”

“I don’t know, dear. The Chief Inspector was worried about you, because of the way things had been happening, and so we were all on the watch. That’s why I locked your bathroom door this side and took the key away, just in case anybody got in there.”

“Then it’s a complete mystery. I just don’t understand——”

“Neither do I,” replied Nurse Dormer, “but you’ve got over it very nicely. And I didn’t want you to think we weren’t looking after you, because we were.”

Judith had closed her eyes, and tears trickled down her face.

“You’ve been an angel to me,” she said weakly, “but it’s all so confusing. Was the Chief Inspector here last night?”

“I don’t know, dear. I was so busy; but he was here when we found you. I think he’s a very fine man. I believe he knows what really happened, although of course he hasn’t said anything. Oh, and I’d better tell you. He asked me for the book Mr. Standish left for you, and he’s looking after it. I expect he’ll bring it himself when you’re feeling a bit better. Why, here’s Janet back again. What a good girl she is. Now you’ve talked quite enough, dear. I’ll just pull the curtains and you can have a nice rest.”

Nurse Dormer went away, and Janet sat down with her knitting. The room was very quiet and Judith lay quite still. It was half an hour later that she gave a sudden cry.

“Janet! Janet! Go and fetch the Chief Inspector. At once, Janet.”

The maid got up. “I’ll just call Nurse, Miss Judith. I don’t like to leave you.”

“Don’t be silly. Do as I tell you, Janet, *at once*. It’s desperately important. I’ve suddenly realised what happened last night. Tell him I know, and that he’s to come at once. Oh, Janet, *please*. I shouldn’t speak like this unless it mattered terribly.”

“All right, Miss Judith, I’ll go, but I’m going to lock the door as I go out, so’s no one can get in. I’ll run and fetch him.”

Janet was as good as her word. She locked the door and ran downstairs. Saunders was just crossing the hall.

“Where is the Scotland Yard gentleman, Saunders? Miss Vanstead wants him at once.”

“He’s upstairs, in the nurse’s sitting room, I believe.”

Janet raced upstairs again, crossed the landing and pounded on the door of the nurse’s sitting room.

“Mr. Macdonald, sir, are you there?”

Macdonald came to the door at once.

“Will you go to Miss Vanstead, sir, at once? She told me to tell you she knows what happened last night. She made me come to fetch you, but I locked her door, sir, so nobody could get in.”

“Then give me the key,” said Macdonald quietly. “Nurse Wilson, will you come with me, please? You can wait here, Janet.”

6

It was Nurse Wilson who unlocked the bedroom door and went swiftly across to the bed, while Macdonald swung the curtains back and let in the sunshine. By the time he had turned round, Nurse Wilson was straightening the contorted body on the bed.

“We can’t do anything this time,” she said, “Cyanide of potassium. It’s the only poison which kills at once. You just can’t do anything about it.” She paused, and then added, “That girl ought not to have left her, but I’m glad she did, all the same.”

Macdonald nodded. “I’m glad too.”

“Do you think she meant the atropine to kill her when she took it last night?”

“No. That was a bluff, to fix suspicion on Standish. When she realised that we knew she must have taken it herself, because there was no other possibility, she took her own way out. It was the sensible and practical Nurse Dormer who brought about the climax.”

“Don’t tell her so,” pleaded Nurse Wilson.

“Of course I shan’t. Actually, there’s no object in doing so. Although she would never admit it, even to herself, I think Nurse Dormer guessed. As I did. But there was precious little direct evidence.”

“Standish?”

“He would never have given her away. He’d rather have been hanged himself.”

Nurse Wilson drew the sheet up over the contorted face.

“And they all thought she was such an angel,” she said wonderingly.

Chapter 17

1

“Judith Vanstead? Judith——”

Gilbert Barton spoke as a man who was utterly confounded, incredulous to the point of doubting the evidence of his own senses.

Macdonald replied in prosaic manner: “Well, she had the most to gain, hadn’t she? Judith wanted one thing and one thing only, to be mistress of Templedean Place. While her father lived, her position was secure. If Gerald had outlived Sir Charles, Judith would have been included in ‘the clean sweep.’”

“She was the one person I never suspected—nobody suspected,” said Barton. “She was—so good to everybody.”

Macdonald turned to Elizabeth, a question in his eyes.

She shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said slowly. “I didn’t suspect her, but I wondered. *Why* was she so generous to us? Gilbert said it was goodness of heart. I never felt like that about her. I knew she wanted to be liked and admired, so that everyone said ‘Of course she’s an angel,’ and I knew she was afraid of something. I once had an awful suspicion that she believed Gilbert killed Gerald, and she was showing her gratitude——”

“Good God, Liza—that’s a bit thick,” protested Gilbert.

“Well, I always told you there was something queer about her,” said Elizabeth, “though I never thought she could have done it herself.”

“Well, if you think it out, it seems as reasonable as any other supposition,” said Macdonald. “Gerald Vanstead made a number of enemies, but the person who stood to lose most if Gerald inherited was the person who possessed most, and who idolised possession. Miss Vanstead of Templedean Place had a fine position in the world; she had power, and she enjoyed it. She was an autocrat who enjoyed being benevolent, because her benevolence added to her sense of power. That was all plain enough. The point was: could she have done it? And, if so, was there any evidence to prove she did do it? The answer to the first was simple. Yes. She could have done it. She was a good driver. During the war, when she had no chauffeur, she looked after her own car. Provided she knew that Gerald Vanstead habitually came down Templedean Hill out of gear, she could have caused that smash. But I saw no chance of getting any evidence to support the possibility. I believed that Beach had told her about Gerald’s bad driving, but he would never admit that he had done so. I know now that Standish saw her go downstairs during the night before the car crash, but even had he admitted this earlier, it was of no value as evidence. Judith Vanstead habitually went to see her father sometime during the course of the night; it was quite usual for her to be about the house in the small hours. When I learnt that, I added it to the other points which showed that it was possible, even easy, for Judith to have meddled with the brake drums that night, but it didn’t make even the beginning of a case against her. By the time I arrived, it was too late to get any precise evidence, and, as the local men knew, it would have been hopeless to take it into court without firsthand evidence, which no one was likely to give.”

Elizabeth interrupted here: “It was to nobody’s interest to get Judith Vanstead suspected, was it? She was so good to everybody: to Beach, and to Standish, and to ourselves. When

anybody is generous to you, it's unnatural to try to make trouble for them."

Macdonald nodded: "That's about it. Well, that's where I stood when I first studied Young's reports, and believe me, he'd put in every bit of detail he could find. I saw no hope of getting any farther with the car crash case; my problem was to find if Alan had been murdered. If there was any likelihood of this, could I connect it up with Gerald Vanstead's death? Could the same person have committed both crimes? You know the suspects: Beach, Standish, Walter Vanstead and Barton, to whom I added Judith Vanstead. Only I put her at the top of the list because I thought she had the strongest motive. Gerald was dead, but if Alan grew up he would inherit the Templedean estate. How much easier to eliminate Alan while he was still a sickly little boy, before he had inherited at all. If Alan died before Sir Charles Vanstead did, another lot of death duties would be avoided."

Macdonald paused, and Barton said helplessly: "I didn't think of that one, either."

"Blessed is he that hath a simple mind," said Elizabeth, and Macdonald went on:

"A detective can't afford the luxury of a simple mind. Having observed the previous points, I began to analyse the method behind the two cases. Gerald had died because someone observed his own weakness. He was a shocking driver. Alan died because he was a greedy little boy—he was known to eat anything he could find—and frequently made himself sick doing so. There seemed to be the same sort of reasoning behind both cases. Now Alan, it was assumed, had died of eating deadly nightshade berries, the poisonous property of which is a constituent of the drug atropine, but it was highly improbable that Alan found nightshade berries in the wood. This caused a question to arise in my own mind—was it the deadly nightshade berries which had killed him? While it was pretty certain that he had died of some form of atropine poisoning—the doctors wouldn't have been mistaken about that—it is frequently forgotten that there are variants on the theme of atropine which produce identical symptoms. The drug atropine, used in medical practice, is an alkaloid, which, contrary to general belief, does not occur in nature under normal conditions. In other words, atropine can be obtained from *Atropa belladonna* by a laboratory process, but is not identical with the juices of that plant."

Elizabeth gave a startled exclamation. "Heavens! I never knew that."

"Now if Alan had been poisoned by the alkaloid atropine, and not by the berries," went on Macdonald, "the whole case would look very different."

"You mean you thought of that yourself before you got the result of the p.m.?" asked Gilbert.

"Yes. It occurred to me that someone might be trying to be clever without sufficient data," said Macdonald.

"But the berries were found in Alan's pockets," said Elizabeth.

"Admittedly, but that didn't prove that he put them there, any more than it proved that he ate them," went on Macdonald. "It seemed possible they were put there to provide the obvious explanation, and I was rather wary of obvious explanations. The overwhelming probability was that *Atropa belladonna* did not grow in Bury Wood, and that therefore Alan had never found it there. But the berries might have been found by someone else, and put in Alan's pockets to hoodwink the doctors, while Alan himself had been poisoned by a known lethal dose of the real alkaloid, atropine. I think I tended to consider this possibility seriously because I knew from Young's report that Judith Vanstead had been helping to clean the dispensary cupboards at the hospital on the day that her brother was killed."

"I knew that, but I didn't connect it up with Alan's death," said Elizabeth.

“At that stage I was only developing a hypothesis,” said Macdonald, “but I noted various points about Judith Vanstead. I was satisfied that it would not have been impossible for her to meddle with the brake drums on Gerald’s car at night. She could have obtained atropine from the hospital dispensary. Alan was poisoned on the day that Nurse Dormer was away for the night and on the day that Dr. Rasen had no evening surgery and would probably be out, and I was pretty sure that Miss Vanstead would have known both those facts.”

“But you still didn’t know, at that stage, that it was the alkaloid atropine which had been used?” asked Elizabeth.

“No,” replied Macdonald. “It was a supposition—no more. But the more I thought about it, the more possible it appeared. But, as I reminded myself, Standish could probably have obtained atropine. When I interrogated him, he was obviously afraid, very much afraid. He didn’t come out of the questioning ordeal with enhanced credit; in fact he appeared stupid, as well as frightened. Now although Standish may have obvious weaknesses—I think he’s lazy, and much too fond of his own comfort—he can’t be really stupid, because Sir Charles Vanstead would not tolerate a stupid secretary. Standish was chosen for that job because he had an able brain and the ability to dispense expert information. Of all the suspects, Standish was the one who should have had the ability to plan beforehand and to carry out his plan with precision. Yet if he had killed Alan, he had landed himself in the regrettable position of putting the child to bed and having been the last person to deal with him. Would he have risked doing that if he had poisoned the child? It seemed improbable to me.”

“And Miss Vanstead, on the other hand, got out of putting the child to bed,” said Elizabeth. “I never thought of that, although I know that exhausted look coupled to the brave smile. . . . Oh dear, how awful!”

“And then Miss Vanstead, who is a bad sleeper, lay down on her bed at half-past two in the afternoon and slept solidly until half past six,” went on Macdonald, “despite the fact that she knew that none of the servants was likely to bother about Alan. That struck me as very odd, with regard to a person who stressed her own sense of responsibility for the child in every other sentence she uttered. However, I tried to keep an open mind about it. But I did suggest to her that there was a possibility that she herself had been drugged, and she jumped at that idea.”

“Well, in the circumstances I suppose it *was* possible,” argued Barton.

“Perhaps, but not probable. Remember that she was a bad sleeper; it would probably have taken quite a big dose to send her off to sleep so soundly, and to the best of my belief, nearly everybody feels the result of a drug. I asked her maid if Miss Vanstead felt ill when she woke up, or if she seemed only half awake, but Janet said Miss Vanstead was very bright when she woke up. ‘I’ve had such a heavenly sleep,’ was what she said.

“Well, there you have a rough résumé,” went on Macdonald, “an outline of impressions set out for consideration. I had discussed the case with Young and Brown, who thought that Alan had been killed to prevent him giving evidence about the car smash. I had analysed motives to the tune of ‘Who stands to profit most?’ I had talked to Judith Vanstead, to Standish, to Sir Charles, to Walter Vanstead, and to Beach. I did not know definitely until later in the day that Alan was not poisoned by the nightshade berries, but I knew that Judith Vanstead had worked at the hospital, and had been cleaning the dispensary there when her brother was killed.”

“Why did you give that order about nobody going in to see Sir Charles?” asked Elizabeth.

“For more reasons than one. I agreed that Young and Brown were logical in their suggestion as to the reason for Alan’s death. If somebody had killed the boy to prevent him from talking to the police, it was possible the same procedure might be repeated with somebody else as victim, and Walter Vanstead was so obviously put out when I ‘forced myself on a dying man,’ as he put it, that I thought precautions advisable, but there was another idea in my mind too. I wanted to get one of our own trained nurses into the house, a woman who had been trained in police work as well as in hospital nursing, I could have stayed in the house myself, but I thought the nurse might be more useful than I could be. You see, I had warned Judith Vanstead that an attempt might be made to poison herself, and she was a very receptive person. If she *had* done this crime, what better way of showing her innocence than by becoming a victim? You see, they all realised by this time that the accident theory had gone to the wall. I hadn’t handled any of them very gently.”

“That was one of the chief differences between you and the local police,” said Barton. “Men like Young and Brown can never quite get over the belief in which they were brought up, that families like the Vansteads have to be handled carefully. Besides, they accepted the general judgment that Judith was an angel.”

“That’s why an outsider like myself is often useful,” agreed Macdonald. “It gets rid of bias and accepted privilege. As you know, I had Nurse Wilson brought into the house quite openly, as night nurse. I also had one of my own men brought in, not openly, at all. He was concealed behind the curtains in one of the window embrasures in the east wing, in view of Miss Vanstead’s bedroom. In this way I had Sir Charles’s room under observation as well as Judith Vanstead’s. I wanted to be quite certain about the identity of anybody who tried—or did not try—to get into either of those bedrooms. I had Standish followed, and there was another fellow to keep an eye on the departure and homecoming of Walter Vanstead and Beach in the Daimler, so I did my best to prevent any unobserved ‘accidents.’”

“What did Standish do that evening?” asked Barton.

“In the main, he walked—as a man does walk when he is beside himself. He went up the hills to the border of Bury Wood, but he turned back there and came here.”

“I shall always hate myself for the way I treated him that evening,” said Elizabeth sadly, “but I couldn’t just be nice to him and talk to him as a friend after the way I had discussed him with you. I felt pretty bad about it.”

“I don’t waste much sympathy over Standish,” said Macdonald. “I admit he was passionately devoted to Judith Vanstead, but he became very nearly accessory to her crimes. He knew she had been outside the house on the night before Gerald’s death, though he swears he did not suspect her of touching the car.”

“I think that would be true,” said Barton staunchly. “He would never have believed her capable of such a thing.”

“Maybe not, but remember that it was Standish who drove Alan and Judith Vanstead back from the picnic. She sat on the edge of the back seat, turned away from Standish and bending over the boy. Standish has now admitted that he saw her take a flask from her bag and bend over Alan with it. Again he swears he did not suspect her. When he reached the house again that night, after going to the badger set, Walter Vanstead told him Alan was dead, and showed him the nightshade berries. Standish began to think. The results of his thinking, had he been an honest man, should have taken him to the police to report that *Atropa belladonna* did not

grow, and never had grown, in Bury Wood. Instead of that he went back to the wood and set fire to it.”

“But you might spare some pity for the poor devil,” said Barton. “He loved the woman. He was ready, at long last, to confess he’d committed her crimes.”

His voice broke off, and again Macdonald turned to Elizabeth with a tacit question.

“I can’t be quite fair to him because I’ve never liked him,” she said slowly. “I can’t help feeling that if everything had been easy, if Alan’s death had just passed as misadventure, Standish would have been quite willing to forget all his suspicions and devote himself to Judith and the comforts of Templedean.”

“When he has recovered from the results of his broken crown, he will have to face the implications of what he did,” said Macdonald, “but let us go back to that night at Templedean, when Judith Vanstead tried to prove her own innocence by getting poisoned. Nurse Dormer was very efficient. She saw to it that it was impossible for Judith Vanstead to be poisoned by anything normally at hand in a bedroom. She changed the water in the jug and she changed the aspirin bottle. When Standish came up onto the landing, where he hesitated about, but made no attempt to enter the bedroom or knock on the door, Nurse Dormer found him. She told him to put the book down on the table, but she did not take it into the bedroom. Nurse Dormer had got to the state of mind when she believed even a book might convey poison. Nobody went into Judith Vanstead’s room that night between the time Nurse Dormer left her and the time Nurse went in again after the ambulance had left. Yet Judith Vanstead was poisoned with atropine during that time. I felt I had my answer, but it was Nurse Dormer who, all unsuspecting, convinced Judith that the game was up. When she was allowed to discuss the matter, Judith immediately said: ‘It must have been the second aspirin I took, after you had left me, Nurse,’ but Nurse Dormer said ‘Oh no, it wasn’t. I changed the aspirin bottles. I changed the water in the jug. I locked the bathroom door, and Mr. Standish did *not* come into this room, because he was watched.’ Whereupon I think Judith Vanstead was quite intelligent enough to realise that she had fallen into a trap by taking a mild dose of atropine, because it could be proved that no one but herself could have administered it. Poisoning by any other party was ruled out.”

“So she gave up—and killed herself,” said Elizabeth.

“Yes. I think the final straw was learning that Standish had left a letter for her in the book which Nurse Dormer did not give to her. Judith knew that Standish had guessed. She must have known that it was he who fired the wood, because he knew that *Atropa belladonna* did not grow there. When she learnt that he had written her a letter, and that the letter was now in my possession, it was the final straw. Rather than face it out, she killed herself. You see, she had been certain the whole thing would be taken as accident, and once the accident theory was challenged, her nerve went.”

“How did she get the cyanide of potassium?” asked Elizabeth.

“Undoubtedly she got it from Standish’s little lab. He was a naturalist, he had killing bottles, and a supply of cyanide for dealing with wasps’ nests.”

“May we ask some more questions?” said Elizabeth, and Macdonald nodded.

“As many as you like. I think you deserve to. You’ve both had a fairly worrying time, haven’t you? Although you trusted each other absolutely, it wasn’t very comforting to realise

what local gossip is capable of.”

“I’m glad you said that,” said Elizabeth. “I knew Gilbert couldn’t and wouldn’t murder anybody . . . but I hated to realise that some people said he’d had a motive to get Gerald out of the way. But do tell me, why didn’t Judith give Alan the nightshade berries? Why did she bring atropine into it?”

“Because her information about the lethal properties of the berries was very inexact, I believe,” said Macdonald. “How many would she have had to give him? She didn’t know, and she had no means of finding out. But she could ascertain the lethal dose of atropine, and it never occurred to her that the two drugs were not identical. That is surmise, of course, but I think it’s probably correct. I was also interested in the timing of the dose. You suggested, Mrs. Barton, after logical consideration of the facts, that Alan was given the berries before he went to the picnic.”

“Yes, I argued about his being sick.”

“Very sensibly. But if he had been given atropine in any form *before* the picnic, it would have affected the pupils of his eyes in a very short time, and you yourself would have noticed it. No. I argued it must have been given in the car, or when Standish was carrying him. But when I learnt from the p.m. results that it was the alkaloid which killed Alan, I did not put that down to Standish. He would have known that the juices of *Atropa belladonna*, from which atropine can be derived in the lab, would not have been confused with the alkaloid if there were a p.m. Standish has a precise mind.”

“*Did* Standish attack Walter Vanstead, or vice versa?” asked Gilbert.

“Yes, Standish did attack him, Vanstead mocked him for imagining that he had won Judith’s affections, when Judith really despised him as a rank outsider. Considering that Standish had spent the evening deciding to confess to Judith’s crimes and take their consequences, it was perhaps not unnatural that he should have attacked Vanstead in a blazing rage for putting in that bit about the ‘rank outsider.’ Vanstead, despite his years, is still too spry to wait for a drunken man to hit him over the head with a whisky bottle.”

“Did you ever really suspect Walter Vanstead?” asked Elizabeth.

“I included him among the suspects, as I included you two. I had to. But although it was in character for him to meddle with the brake drums of a car, I couldn’t see him being clever with nightshade berries. I doubt if he would have known what they looked like, and it was highly improbable he knew where to find them growing. Judith Vanstead, who was friendly with Standish, could easily have studied the illustrations in the excellent books in Standish’s little lab. Perhaps it was a good thing she didn’t go further and read up on *Atropa belladonna* in detail. She would then have learnt that the alkaloid atropine is not identical with the juices of nightshade berries.”

“Does Sir Charles know what happened?” asked Elizabeth.

“Yes. He asked to be told, and I had to tell him. It wasn’t as painful as you might imagine. For one thing, I think he argued it out for himself, and he has no feelings left, only intelligence. He is so near death that he regards death as a commonplace. He’s an astonishing old man. His principal reaction was to send for his lawyer to make a fresh disposition of his property.”

“I think that’s the saddest thing you’ve said,” put in Elizabeth soberly. “The only thing that seems to matter to them is property.”

“I think that’s the conclusion of the whole matter,” said Macdonald. “As a family, they overvalued their own possessions, forgetting the old adage—‘There’s no pocket in a shroud.’ ”

THE END

[The end of *Accident by Design* by Edith Caroline Rivett [as E. C. R. Lorac]]